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DECEMBER

THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

DEATH'S SADDLEMATES

NOVELETTE OF BORDER GUNMEN

by WALT COBURN

2 BIG NOVELS BY
T. T. FLYNN · OLIVER KING

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DECEMBER STAR WESTERN 15¢

"DEACON" BOTTLE STORY

AND JUST WHEN I'VE MET THE SWELLEST GIRL

A new crop of pimples was always taking the joy out of things!

WHAT'S WRONG, TED? YOU LOOK ALL WASHED UP!
DON'T I KNOW IT! I **WOULD** HAVE TO GET A FLOCK OF CHIN BLOSSOMS JUST WHEN I WANT TO MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION ON SALLY

IF THAT'S ALL—CHEER UP! I MEANT TO TELL YOU SIS SAID TO TRY FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST— 3 CAKES A DAY, AND PIMPLES VAMOOSE
HONESTLY? THEN IT'S FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST FOR ME—IN A HURRY

2 WEEKS LATER
HELLO, TED— WHERE HAVE **YOU** BEEN THESE PAST TWO WEEKS?
OH, JUST OUT LOOKING TO MAKE SURE THERE WERE NO GIRLS AS PRETTY AS YOU—AND THERE AREN'T!

Don't let adolescent pimples spoil any of YOUR dates!

From about 13 to 25 years of age, important glands develop, causing disturbances throughout the body. Waste poisons enter the blood. These irritate the skin, cause pimples. Doctors prescribe Fleischmann's Yeast for adolescent pimples. It clears skin irritants out of the blood, pimples disappear. Eat 3 cakes a day until the skin clears.

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—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

The only man who could talk to the Superintendent

For several years, he was just like a score of other men in the plant—a good, honest, fairly capable worker, but only that. There was nothing distinctive about him or his ability—nothing to make him stand out from the crowd—no reason, as a matter of fact, why he should ever receive a raise.

Then one fortunate day he decided that the reason he wasn't getting anywhere was because he lacked special training. He searched around a bit—asked a great many questions—and then enrolled for a home-study course with the International Correspondence Schools.

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"I certainly was glad then that I had decided to study in my spare time. For, thanks to my I. C. S. course, I was the only man in the organization who could talk to the superintendent in his own language. As a result, I was promoted over men who had been here from ten to twenty years."

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STAR WESTERN

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VOLUME SEVEN | DECEMBER, 1935 | NUMBER THREE

★ ★ Two Big Star Novels ★ ★

BOOTHILL LAWMAN! ..... By Oliver King 12

How could Walk Larsen fight on alone to win peace and security for the rich cattleland he loved—when he was hunted in exile as a bushwhack killer!

OUTLAWED BY THE OWLHOOT! ..... By T. T. Flynn 52

Ran Malone offered up his life to save a girl who hated him from his owlhoot partners—though she had gunned him across the desert into the shadow of hangman's tree.

★ ★ ★ Star Novelettes ★ ★ ★

DEATH'S SADDLEMATES ..... By Walt Coburn 88

It was the father of Bob Badger's best girl who haunted his trail—determined to bring back the young renegade to the grim range justice meted out to all dry-gulching renegades.

DAMNED MAN'S DEPUTY ..... By Harry F. Olmsted 110

Could Duane Carson, foster-son of Tassajera's old sheriff, come back and lick a whole town that had turned against him—or would he give in to fear and bribery, as the oldster had done before him?

GUN BOSS OF HELL'S WELLS ..... By Luke Short 140

It was a strange gun-partnership of the veteran outlaw and the youngster—for it was made of enmity—and sealed with hot lead in the owlhoot's toughest hangout.

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GALLOWS ROAD ..... By John G. Pearsol 40

Kid Barlow's trail lead straight through hell—to the gallows!

A HANGNOOSE FOR THE DEACON ..... By Robert E. Mahaffay 77

The Deacon could have saved his neck—by running out on a helpless girl!

GUN-MASTER'S PUPIL ..... By Cliff Farrell 101

Johnny Duval couldn't let the man he'd sworn to kill be shot down by another.

GUNSMOKE SENTENCE ..... By Gunnison Steele 129

Could even an outlaw let the sheriff who was gunning him die in torture?

★ ★ Other Star Features ★ ★

PARTNERS IN GUNSMOKE ..... The Maverick 10

Old Matt Sefton would shoot his partner for turning traitor to the frontier code.

UP THE TRAIL ..... A Department 159

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Story Illustrations by Don Hewett and Hamilton Greene

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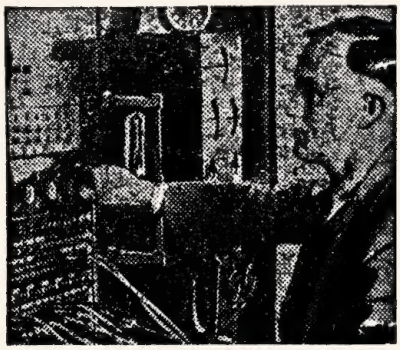

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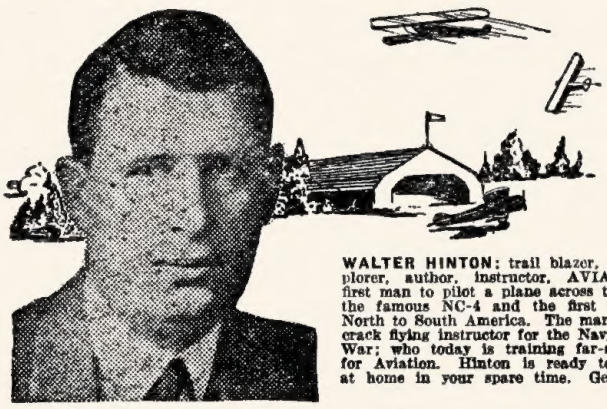

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28x5.50-18	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
6.00-17	3.10	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.10	1.15
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33x5	3.40	1.45
35x5	3.55	1.55

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38x7	9.95	3.95
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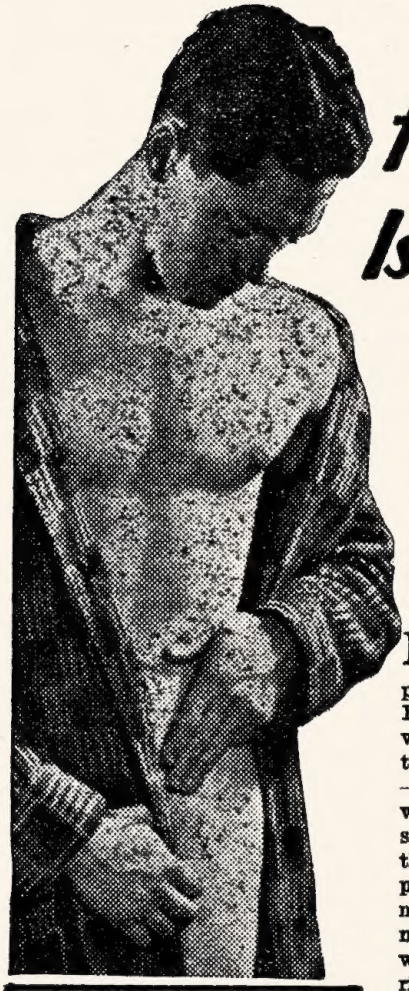

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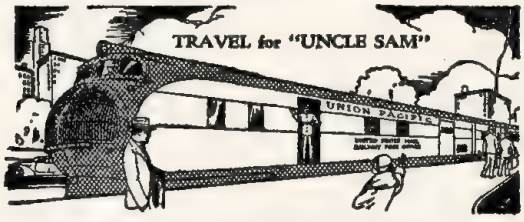

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Partners In Gunsmoke

YOUNG MATT SEFTON and his slender wife came to the Smoky River country in a covered wagon, shortly after the California gold rush of '49. On a wooded knoll, at the base of which rushed the turbulent Smoky, Matt dropped the reins, unhitched the horses. "Better than washin' those California river beds for color," said Matt. "Here's good water; good grazin'. I got enough to buy me a herd of those Mexican cattle and settle here. Molly, get outa the wagon. We're buildin' us a house."

After the chinked cabin of peeled logs was put up, Matt saddled up, left the Sharps and plenty of home-made cartridges for Molly, then started to gather his herd. Five months later he rode back with it, driven by half a dozen Mexican trail-hands. Dull-eyed, grimly, Matt looked at the burned ruins of his cabin and corrals; staring at the sign left by the Apache raiders.

Molly Sefton, however, had escaped with her life. Wounded, she had made her way to the little sod-roofed shack that some new neighbors had put up in Matt's absence. Her coming had brought the Thomas family warning of the Indian raid. Matt, meeting the Thomases for the first time and seeing Molly safe, was grateful. "What this country needs is more good neighbors," he said.

They started to build again. No log shack this time, but thick adobe walls, eight feet thick at the base, with handy loop-holes for rifles above. Outbuildings and corrals were all within that protected enclosure. "Sefton's Fort," they called it.

New neighbors did start coming into that seemingly boundless lush grazing land. Matt, apparently destined to make money from the first, always started the newcomers off right. He gave them cattle; credit; the use of his vaqueros. His herds increased; it took a rider days and nights to cross the rolling land that came under the Slash S brand.

No great feudal lord of old ever held a more absolute sway over his domain. Matt Sefton's word was the only law there was; but it was a just and kindly law, suited to the needs of the many, rather than for the few. He had given more than twenty families a start in that country. At feast days and holidays, great *bailes* were held at the Fort behind the bullet-scarred adobe walls. There was a small mission there; a school also, taught by Matt's eldest daughter.

Then a youngster, a shirt-tail relative of some of the squatters who had come in after the Civil War, was caught working over a couple of calves with a running iron. The calves' mothers, Slash S cows, stood nearby, calling. The kid was not hanged or shot; old Matt banished him from the country.

Before he left, the kid said: "You think yo're God here, Sefton, but yuh ain't. I'm comin' back some day. I'll make yuh damn sorry yuh ever saw me."

He rode off, and was forgotten.

But from that time on, dissension seemed to stir the little world that old Matt Sefton ruled. There were heavier disputes about grass and water rights. What once had seemed an endless stretch of grazing land, now became crowded with a bunch of shifty-eyed newcomers—a different breed from those whom Matt Sefton had started there in the Smoky Valley.

Ten years later the youngster came back. He looked prosperous. With him was a party of rich Easterners and some politicians from the territory capitol. They went directly to the old adobe fort and talked to Sefton.

"We got the right of way through yore land here, Sefton," said the one-time exile. "The legislature's just passed a bill givin' us the right to build a railroad through your range, feller." He laughed.

Old Matt swore. "You'll lay yore rails through gunsmoke, then," he warned the men. And old Bill Thomas backed him up.

But the railroad came, despite Sefton's threat. Old Matt didn't back down; he lost five men fighting it. Lost land, too, to pay lawyers' fees and

court costs. Already more than half his great holdings had disappeared. But that wasn't what made him so bitter.

"Railroads will bring nesters. Nesters'll bring fences. Soon all you'll see here is a bunch of small dirt farms—an' sheep, probably—where real men used to run longhorns," he said to Bill Thomas.

"Don't you fret, Matt," Bill replied. "I'm holdin' onto my range, an' what's mine is yours, every day in the week."

They shook on that. Old Matt realized that Bill Thomas' holdings were larger and better than his, now. In fact, it was necessary that he take up his friend's offer of grazing and water rights. Matt Sefton's land was over stocked, and cattle weren't worth a dime a dozen at market.

Matt Sefton was right about the railroads bringing fencers. The pound of hammers on fence posts in the Smoky Valley now sounded the death-knell of the free range that Matt knew and loved.

Again he went to war, mortgaging what land he had left to pay fighting wages. Fencers were killed; but so were Sefton's gunnies. Bill Thomas fought shoulder to shoulder with him. Matt's guns flamed against the sons of his old neighbors—folks who'd owed their prosperity to Matt's generosity. It hurt Matt Sefton, because he figured those people who had helped the railroad, and now were stringing barbed wire across the range, were traitors.

With each new defeat, Matt seemed to lose more interest in working his small spread. Hate for these changes burned bitterly within him, using up the energy that he might better have saved in order to build anew.

Then, one morning, he rode out to see Bill Thomas. Sitting his saddle there beyond the Smoky, his old lips moved with a soundless curse. Across a five-strand fence of barbed wire, marking the West boundary of Bill's ranch, he saw a fat, sleek herd of blooded stock. That meant Matt Sefton was doomed. His cattle, the rangy longhorn breed that was Matt Sefton's life, would have to give way before these fancy stock-farm cows.

Thomas rode up then, through the gate. He looked a bit shame-faced. "I was sorta caught," Bill Thomas explained. "These here Herefords pack five times the meat that the old sea-lions used to. An' to run these cattle, you gotta have fences. You see that, don't you, Matt?"

Without a word, Matt Sefton turned his horse and rode back again to his crumbling adobe. So Bill Thomas had turned traitor, too! Wiping out his old friend! In a white rage, Matt Sefton loaded his saddle gun. . . .

He rode back again to Bill's west fence, in the dark of the moon, with a pair of wire clippers and a saddle gun. By dawn, he'd cut almost two miles of fence. Then he rode toward the Thomas ranch-house, his carbine in his hand. He'd knock on the door, then let Bill Thomas have it . . .

There was no answer, so, grim-faced, he stepped inside. There were crimson blotches on the floor. He followed them up to the bedroom. There, at the top of the stairs lay Bill Thomas, in his own blood. Bill opened his eyes, looked up.

"Matt," he gasped. "Some fellers cut my West fence last night; run off most of my Herefords. Matt, I reckon you was right. I—I'm mighty glad you come here, 'cause I wanted to tell you so. You—an' me, Matt. Like we was in the old days. . . . "

Matt Sefton laid his rifle up against the wall. He knelt by the side of his old friend, a strange new light in his eyes. "Mebbe each of us was wrong, Matt. I—I was settin' out to kill you, for goin' against me, thataway. But what I was really doin' was tryin' tuh kill the fences; to kill the thing that no one can ever kill; the comin' of another age." His voice choked, as his hand clasped that of his old partner, "You'll get well. We got ten good years yet. Somethin' to live for. We got the same land, an' we'll fight her through shoulder-to-shoulder, like the old days. We got a fine spread here; an' after I get you fixed up, I'm goin' to get them damn fence-cuttin' snakes. . . . "

And, again, Matt Sefton was right!

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Boothill Lawman!

A cowman born and bred was Walk Larson, in his blood the stuff of Empire builders. Yet what man could keep on fighting a lone-hand battle to win peace and security for the rich cattle-land he loved, when he was hunted in exile as a bushwhack killer?

WHEN Walk Larsen thought of Jake Lavery's gun, an empty, sick feeling came under his breastbone. The palms of his hands began to sweat so that the moisture came off them onto the Colt forty-five he was cleaning and mixed with the oil on the barrel.

Until now, he had kept the thought of Lavery's gun-threat out of his mind. Anger had helped to keep it away—anger and the hard, driving habit of mind of a man accustomed to do what he had to do without any fuss.

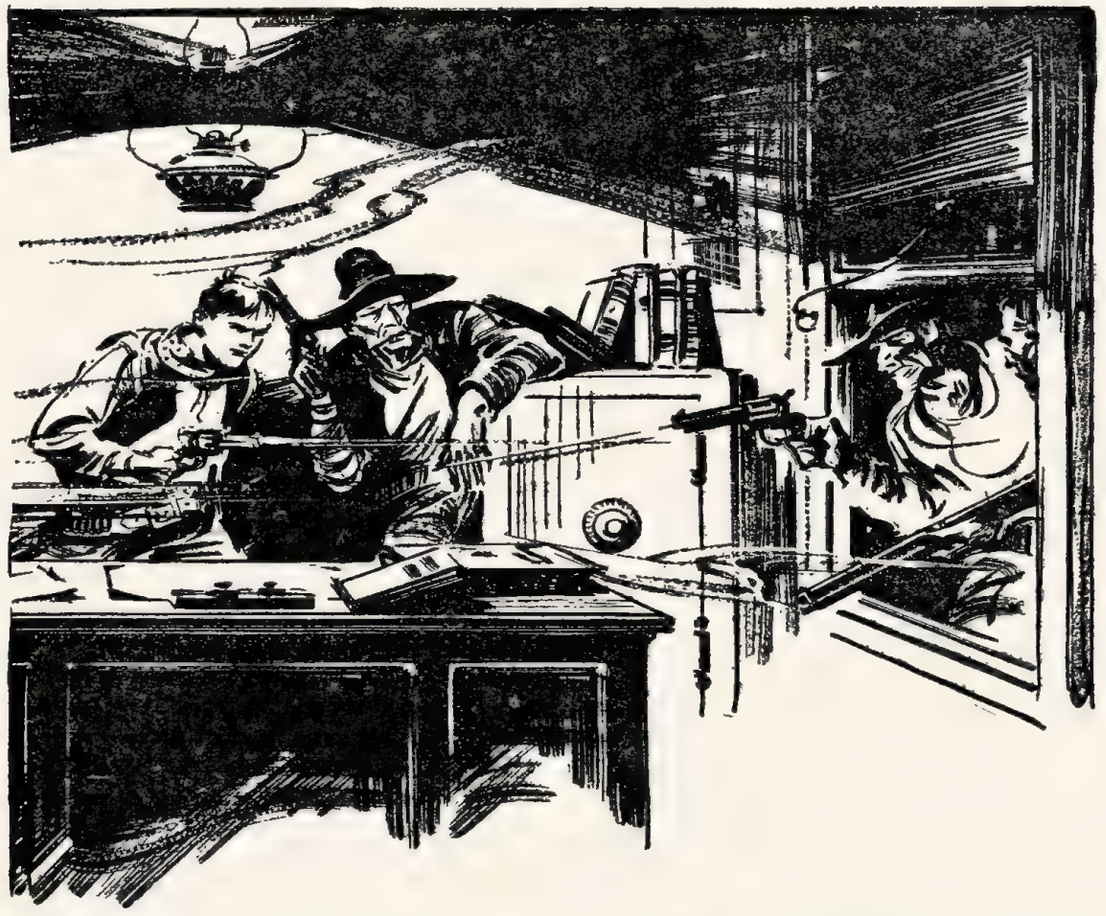
He looked around the room, seeing Curly's bunk, and the door leading into the kitchen that had always had its frame a little out of plumb. The walls were hung with gear—his extra saddle; a couple of broken bridles he had never gotten around to mending; horsehair riatas; a Winches-

Boothill Lawman!

Smashing Outlaw Novel

By OLIVER KING

(Author of "Boom-town Marshal," etc.)



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Through the open door he could see a corner of the corral and his top horse, Geronimo. Jerry's ears were pricked up; his alert sorrel head looked off across the range toward the Hardpan Hills. The outline of the hills was a little hazy in the heat waves rippling up over the range, but it was easy to make out the distorted masses, riven by deep gashes; and the rock-walled ravines criss-crossed by gullies and washes.

It came to him that the barren, upended stretch of badlands was responsible for the fix he was in. It had licked old "Uncle Dan" Wesley who had been the sheriff of Kokache County for thirty years. That land was the real reason why Uncle Dan had announced that he wouldn't run for sheriff again at the expiration of his term. He might talk about old age all he wanted to, but that tough old-timer didn't feel old. The hills, which offered a million trailless hideouts, had licked him finally as they might lick any man.

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But the sheriff's office had been tempting bait for young Walk Larsen and he'd go after the job the minute Uncle Dan

quit. Yet now his stomach shrunk up with a sense of his own brashness. What the hell did he know about sheriffing? He'd never thrown a gun on a man in his life, and he didn't relish the prospect of doing it.

He laughed, suddenly, harshly. "You sure got yoreself in one hell of a fix!" he said aloud, in self-contempt.

He kept himself from thinking directly about Jane Carter, to whom the sheriff's job, if he got it, might enable him to propose marriage. That was the trouble. He'd been thinking about the salary that went with the job—not about the duties of the office.

WALK put the finishing touches on the gun, loaded it, and slipped it into the holster which hung on the chair near his bunk when he heard Curly ride into the ranch-yard. Curly, his partner, was little more than a kid, but he knew ranching. He'd do to ride the river with, any day.

"Hiya, cowboy." Walk grinned at Curly as the kid stepped into the room.

"Hiya—Sheriff."

The heartiness was a little overdone. Walk forced a grin. "Yuh kinda previous, old timer. Better wait until after election tomorrer."

Curly flung his hat on the bunk and sat down, spraddling his legs and lying back. "Hell," he grinned, "from what I hear she's wropped up tighter'n a hoss-thief in a green beef-hide. Jake Lavery ain't got a chance against you, Walk. You got him on the run."

Walk said nothing.

"That's the reason he's givin' up head the way he is," Curly went on. "He knows he's licked less'n he can make folks believe some foolishness about yuh."

Walk said, "Uh-huh," noncommittaly.

His partner stared intently at the back of his fingers. When he spoke, his tone had changed. "Walk—you still figger to ride into town this evenin'?" he asked.

"I reckon."

Curly sat up suddenly. "I been thinkin'," he said. "Yuh'd be loco to do it. What's the sense of runnin' right into a trap? Jake's laid this for yuh. It's plain politics, an' most folks'll see it, without you doin' anythin' about it. He figgers yo're beatin' him an' he's out to ruin yuh any way he can. The only thing he knows is gun-play, so he tries to fix it so yuh'll have to shoot it out with him. That way, he thinks he'll win because there won't be no more other candidate. Looks to me like the smart thing to do is to lay low out here until the election's over. Yuh've already made yore campaign. Yuh got nothin' to do in town. If yuh go in it'll just make it look like yuh was too anxious to win, anyway. What I say is—stay away an' out-smart that buzzard."

Curly finished all in a breath, and continued to stare at the back of his hand.

Walk eyed him, his heart warming suddenly. The boy was a poor liar—always had been, since the day Walk had first run across him, a button of fourteen, whose tenderfoot father and mother had just been drowned trying to drive their wagon across a dry stream bed down which a sudden flood was raging.

Walk said, "Mebbe. The's time to think about it, anyway."

What Jake Lavery had been saying was that Walk Larson was a cattle thief. That was all! He had been saying it openly around the county and in town.

It wasn't the kind of thing a man could ignore, especially a man running for sheriff. And Curly knew that as well as Walk did. If he took the youngster's advice, he knew Curly would never really get over it. The boy had looked up to him, had worshipped him as a boy may do an older brother, since the beginning of their partnership seven years ago. He

had taught the kid all he knew, about riding and shooting, about trailing, about cattle. Now Curly was trying to keep the man he loved from being killed, but Walk knew that if he took his advice and showed yellow, it would kill something in Curly.

Not to speak of the fact that Walk would lose the election unless he took the quarrel up. Jake Lavery had been shrewd in choosing his pretext for an insult. The valley had been bled to death by rustlers for two years now. The fact that he had been unable to trap whoever was guilty had practically forced Sheriff Dan's retirement.

Moreover, the shrewd timing of the raids had caused the belief that somebody in the valley was giving out information, if not actually planning the whole thing. Men had begun to look on one another with suspicion. The entire subject of cattle raiding was sore and inflamed as a boil.

And now Jake Lavery was accusing Walk of being the suspected under-cover man, giving as his reason gossip which had come to him from an outlaw source he was pledged not to reveal.

"Seen Jane today?" Curly asked, after a silence.

"No."

"I run acrost her this mornin' an' she said she might ride over, around sundown."

Walk's eyes flickered. It came into his mind that this talk of Curly's might have been inspired by Jane, but what stayed uppermost was the fact that Curly had seen her that morning. A familiar pang of jealousy shot through him.

UNTIL a few months ago he had no doubt that Jane would marry him. She had shown her preference for him plainly enough. More than once, he had been on the verge of telling her what he felt for her, but he had held back. He wasn't a man who liked to talk about what he intended, in advance. When he could support a wife, he told himself, he would ask her. Until then, it was better to keep his mouth shut.

Then, in the last few months, her attitude toward him had somehow changed. She had been simple and warm before, but now she had suddenly gotten complicated and difficult. She stuck verbal pins in him, or teased him outrageously. Again, she held him at arms' length, like a stranger.

Her attitude to Curly had changed, at the same time. Instead of treating him merely as an old friend and Walk's kid partner, she appeared to take him seriously and to make an obvious effort to be attractive to him. When she was being thorniest with Walk, Curly's arrival was enough to throw her into an entirely different mood—a mood of gaiety and warmth which brought out all her charm.

And Walk thought he could see that Curly was falling in love with her.

He told himself that Curly had every right to do so. Jane had no strings on her. And Curly was nearer her age, being twenty-one to her nineteen, while he himself was thirty. But somehow the thing hurt him. Something in him whispered that it was a betrayal.

Now, feeling the barb strike home again, he shook his head impatiently. He had enough to trouble him at the moment, without that.

"I won't be here if she comes this evenin'," he said suddenly, harshly. "I'm ridin' for town before that."

Instantly, he regretted having spoken. Pain, and the strain on his nerves had ripped the words out of him. He had intended to let Curly think he might not go in, get rid of him on some pretext, and then ride without him. He didn't want the boy mixed up in this business.

Curly's face looked suddenly strained. It was as though he had known all along that his talk had been useless.

"Then I'm ridin' in with yuh."

Walk shrugged. He sat thinking how he could get rid of Curly. After a moment, the boy solved the problem for him.

"Hell!" he said, snapping his fingers, "I meant to ride down an' look over that she-stuff in the south pasture. Plumb forgot it. I'll amble on down there—be back in less'n an hour. You wait right here, will yuh, Walk?"

Walk said, "Yuh might keep an eye out for strays of Carter's. I think some of his calves that's just weaned got through that break in the fence the other day. Yuh might chouse 'em back."

Curly said, "Sure," and walked off briskly to the corral.

Walk continued to work on the bridle until Curly had saddled up and ridden out of sight. Then he got up and buckled on his gun-belt. He lowered the cracked mirror in the corner until it was waist-high and then stood in front of it and drew his gun. It came out fast and smooth, but the butt felt insecure in his hand because his palm was wet.

He had worked a good deal over his draw. He knew it was pretty good, but he knew, too, that practice had its limitations. There was something in the nervous system of a real gunman that just naturally made him faster with a gun than other men. And there wasn't anyway to find out whether you had that something except to go up against a fast man. If it turned out that you didn't have it, or enough of it, why you were just one more unfortunate accident—just a slightly ridiculous memory, and a notch on another man's gun.

Jake Lavery had that something that all natural gunmen must have. He had proven that more than once. All three of the Lavery brothers were considered as tough customers to go up against, but Jake was the worst of the bunch. He didn't have any nerves, and he was a born killer. Theoretically, that single-handed cross-draw of his, with the funny sidewise turn to it, ought to have been a slower way to get a Colt into action than a straight draw from the thigh, but actually it had proven otherwise.

Walk remembered the bloody, bullet-torn body that had been Salt Horse Doran on the floor of the Plugged Dollar after Jake had gotten through with him. And remembering, it was though the slug had taken him, Walk, suddenly in the pit of the stomach.

He put his hat on carefully and went out, wiping the sweat from his face with his bandanna. His hands shook a little.

Jerry didn't have to be roped. He stepped out of the corral gate daintily, head up and nostrils flaring, pretending that he was about to be spooky. Walk threw the saddle on him and cinched it with fingers that fumbled a little, cursing softly to himself.

In the saddle, he sat looking over the place. The mid-afternoon sun was blazing hot, and even so close to him as the house the heat-waves shimmered up visibly. It was a sweet-looking spread, though. Good grass and water. A man couldn't want better.

Absently, he got out paper and tobacco and began to roll a quirley. It was not until he had nearly finished making it that he noticed that the paper was dry. His hands had quit sweating.

He lit the cigarette, picked up the reins and rode off.

CHAPTER TWO

Beyond the Law

AFTER fifteen minutes' ride he pulled up. The Carter house was just over the ridge. He had meant to stay away

from Jane until this was over, but now, at the last moment, he had an overwhelming impulse to see her once more. He turned his horse and rode up the ridge.

Hank Carter was on the front veranda and came out to meet him. Walk had rodded Hank's spread, with Curly as a top-hand, before they had saved enough to start a ranch of their own. Hank had helped them, stocking the place generously with his own cattle. That was before the rustling began. The rustling had hit Hank pretty hard—a lot harder in proportion than it had hit Walk and Curly.

Carter looked older, with lines marked by worry in his face now, as he came toward his former foreman. Yet his odd, tawny eyes, almost the exact color of a puma's, were steady and held their habitual, faintly humorous twinkle. The humor didn't mean anything special, Walk knew. It was there because Hank Carter found things and people interesting and maybe a little funny, and because there never had been anything he had been enough afraid of to take very seriously.

"Where's the redhead?" Walk asked, after they had said "hello".

"Out back in that there thing she calls a per-gola, I reckon," Hank told him. "She seems to have took quite a fancy to it these last coupla days."

Walk nodded. "I'll just drop back an' say 'howdy'."

As he turned to go, Hank stopped him. "I hear Jake Lavery's been talkin' some out of turn."

"Yeah, so I hear," Walk answered dryly.

"You aimin' to call him on it, Walk?"

Walk looked at him. "What would you do in my place, Hank?" he asked softly.

Carter avoided his eyes, his gaze clouded. "I think yuh might carry the election, anyhow," he said carefully. "The's a lot of folks don't take much stock in what a Lavery says—an' a lot of 'em that don't want to see the Laverys get any more of a strangle hold on the county than they already got."

Walk smiled thinly. "What would you do in my place, Hank?" he asked.

The ranchman looked definitely uncomfortable. "Jake Lavery's a killer, Walk," he said slowly. "The' ain't much percentage in goin' up against a layout like that."

"In other words," Walk said, "yuh find it hard to advise a friend to go out an' get himself beefed—that it, Hank?"

Hank Carter threw out his hands in a helpless gesture.

Walk didn't ask him again what he would do. He knew. And he knew what Carter expected him to do. Old-timers like Hank Carter had a code as iron-bound as their own insides.

He walked up past the house to where a creeper-covered pergola commanded a view of the Hardpans and such breeze as there was. That had been Jane's idea—one of the hundred experiments her restless, laughing-eyed energy had evolved. Walk grinned a little, thinking of it, and of her. She was a case, all right. Her gray, yellow-flecked eyes had the same sparkling fearlessness as her dad's, just as her exquisitely carved mouth and chin were delicate replicas of his, with the same determined, unwavering set.

Suddenly, he brought up dead, frozen. Through the arch of the creeper-covered tunnel, he could see into the pergola. Curly stood there, holding Jane close. Her face was buried in his shoulder and her arms were around his neck. In the second that Walk stood there, he saw her body shake a little as though she were in the grip of some strong emotion. And he thought he knew what that emotion was.

Silently, he turned away and went back toward his horse.

Hank was not out in front when he got

there, and he was glad of that. He got on Jerry and sent him off toward town at a high lope.

At first he didn't feel anything much; he was merely numb, like a man who has been badly shocked. Yet there wasn't much surprise. He felt as though he had been expecting it all along. After all, he was a kind of a homely galoot, he supposed, and getting old, while Curly was young and good-looking enough to take almost any girl off her feet.

LIKE a gunshot wound, the numbness wore off presently and nothing was left but raw agony. He felt a cold sweat break out all over him, and he shook like a man in an ague. He tried not to blame Curly. He loved the boy almost as much as he did Jane. But there wasn't any way around the fact that Curly had deliberately taken his girl. They had never talked much about it, but Curly was no fool. He knew what Walk felt for her.

For long moments, he was plunged into a hell of jealousy and there was even a time when he wanted nothing so much as to get Curly at the end of his fists and pound the young life out of him. Then that passed. It might not have been Curly's fault. If he had seen that Jane was in love with him, there hadn't been much else for him to do but take her. Nobody was to blame in a case like that.

By the time he got to town, he had gotten himself in hand. There was nothing left of the storm he had been through except a gnawing pain somewhere deep inside him and a general, black bitterness against life. Outwardly, he was the same.

He dismounted in front of the Plugged Dollar, leaving Jerry's reins thrown over the hitchrack.

He was aware that silence had fallen over the place the moment he entered. Then people began to greet him, his friends with a kind of false cheerfulness. He nodded to them briefly and walked to the bar.

Sudsy Hogan came to serve him with a kind of obsequious haste. "What'll it be, Walk?" he asked respectfully.

"Nothin'," Walk told him. His voice was dry, harsh. "I'm not drinkin' just now. Have yuh seen Jake Lavery?"

Silence hit the room again. Everybody knew what it meant when a man asked for another in that tone of voice.

"He was in here about half a hour ago," Sudsy said nervously. "I reckon he's som'ers aroun' town."

Harve Colton of the Three C Connected strolled over to him and put a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"Glad to see yuh in, Walk," he said. "Have a drink, won't yuh? One never did a man any harm."

The words were innocent enough, but Walk caught the significance of his tone. Harve was telling him that he was glad he wasn't backing down from Jake Lavery. And showing openly that he took no stock in Lavery's talk.

He said quietly, "Thanks, Harve. I'll have one with yuh later."

He walked out and went up the street to another saloon. He wanted to get the thing over with now, as fast as possible. He was conscious of a funny tingle in his gun-arm, running from the tips of his fingers to his elbow, but he did not feel nervous.

Lavery wasn't in that saloon, either. Nor in the next, nor the next.

Walk saw the crowd moving down toward the polling booth and knew that it must be pretty nearly time for it to open. People that he passed on the street looked at him curiously. He could tell from their expressions that word had gotten around that he was looking for Jake Lavery. He walked down to the Opera House, where the voting was to take place. Jake Lavery wasn't there, but

his two brothers, Seth and Ike, were hanging around.

Ike was a bull-necked, heavy-bearded man with glowering black eyes. He stared at Walk, heavy-lidded, without speaking. He packed two guns—heavy, ivory-handled Colts, silver mounted. As Walk moved toward them, his hands lifted to his belt, thumbs hooked over, so that they were directly over the two guns, which he wore rather high.

Seth was different. He was plump and red-cheeked, with a mouth that was usually smiling, though the smile never extended to his dark, somewhat protuberant eyes.

"I'm lookin' for your brother, Jake," Walk told him. "Seen him?"

"He's around som'ers, Walk," Seth told him easily. "Don't know just where."

"I hear he's been callin' me a cattle-thief," Walk clipped. "You in on that?"

Seth shrugged. "I reckon yore quarrel's with Jake. I don't know anythin' but what he tells me."

Walk nodded curt agreement. "If yuh see him before I do," he said, "tell him from me that he's a liar an' a pole-cat, an' that I'm lookin' for him to tell him so."

As he went up the street his eyes shuttled sharply. It seemed funny that his two brothers weren't with Jake—to see that he got a fair shake, or to gun down the man who drilled him. It gave him the idea that Jake might be planning something for which he wouldn't need them.

In front of the hotel, he ran into Sheriff Dan Wesley, on his way down to the opera house.

"I got to warn yuh, Walk," the oldster said heavily. "Keep out of trouble while you're here in town. This here's an' election, not a gun-ballotin'."

"I'll bear what yuh say in mind, Uncle Dan," Walk told him, grim-mouthed, and went on.

Presently, he walked back toward the Opera House. Ike and Seth Lavery were walking up the street toward him. He had his attention fixed on them and almost didn't catch the flicker of movement in the alley-way at his left.

"Lookin' for me, cow-thief?" came Jake Lavery's voice.

WALK saw the gun come out, smooth and very fast. It seemed to him he could see every movement, the play of the fingers and the ripple of the wrist muscles, as though the thing had been done very slowly for his special benefit. He could even see the tension of the thumb on the hammer, holding it back until the muzzle swung in line.

He never was conscious of making his own draw. But suddenly the Colt bellowed at his hip and he could feel the buck of it in his hand. As it bucked, his thumb fanned the hammer back so fast that the second shot was almost an echo of the first.

He stood still, stunned. He had beat Jake Lavery—the best gunman in the county—to the draw! Beat him, when Lavery had all the advantage, and had out-gunned him so far that the other man had not even had a chance to fire!

What followed was more astounding still. Walk had seen his first shot kick dust in Lavery's right side under the armpit. The slug had kicked the man still further sideways and the second shot had blotted out the lower side of his face.

The gunman stood a second with a blank, dazed expression, as though the lead had knocked him silly. Then he frowned a little and carefully lowered the hammer of his gun. Still frowning, intent, like a sleep-walker who has run against a wall, he holstered his gun and started to go away from there.

He walked in a circle for two steps,

then plunged forward into the dust of the street on his face.

Walk watched him, frozen, unable to shake off the horrible fascination of the blank, witless eyes in that face which was only half a face.

Even the scuff of feet behind him and excited voices did not stir him.

"Got him, by God!" an excited voice marvelled. "Walk got him!"

"Got him—*murdered* him, you mean!" Seth Lavery's voice ripped out suddenly, in the mounting tone of excitement which marks the making of a discovery. "Look! He was shot from the side, when he wasn't lookin'. His gun ain't even out of his holster!"

Walk's eyes flashed up from that unmoving body. He was surrounded by a buzzing, rapidly growing crowd; staring into the venomous eyes of Seth Lavery. Ike Lavery knelt beside his brother's body and slipped the gun from the holster.

"Yuh're right, Seth," he said, his voice ugly. "Ain't a shell in it fired. The skunk dry-gulched him."

Awareness flashed on Walk blindingly. This looked like murder. People in the street must have seen him draw without a word, but they hadn't been able to see Jake at all. He was concealed back in the narrow alley.

"You're wrong," he cried. "It was a fair draw. I beat him, is all! He—"

"Yo're a liar," Ike Lavery snarled. "The' ain't a man alive that's fast enough to draw an' shoot before Jake could git his gun out."

Walk heard a man say, back of him, "That's right. I seen him layin' there an' his iron was leathered, all right."

"Shot in the side, too! There ain't no difference between that an' the back."

"He turned sideways to draw," Walk said furiously. "He leathered his gun after I shot him."

Seth Lavery laughed harshly. "How's that for a tall story?" he asked of the crowd, savagely.

Walk saw that Ike Lavery's hands were clawed, shaking a little, near the butts of his guns. He wondered why he didn't draw. Then he remembered suddenly that he still had his own gun in his hand. He had the drop on the big man.

"Listen," Walk began, moistening his lips. Then he broke off. The uselessness of trying to explain came over him overwhelmingly. Nobody would believe him. He wouldn't believe it himself if he was in their place. A dead man doesn't lower the hammer of his gun and put it carefully in its holster before he decides to fall down. There wasn't a jury in the world that wouldn't believe he had shot Jake Lavery when Lavery wasn't looking. The kindest possible interpretation would be that he had gotten excited and fired too soon, without meaning to.

Seth Lavery croaked, "Yuh damn murderer!" and flung himself on Walk's gun-arm. In the same instant, Ike Lavery's hands drove for the white-handled Colts.

Walk exploded into action, without thought. He lammed Seth Lavery aside, smashed Ike's shoulder with one lightning shot, and flung himself through the crowd like a cougar through a pack of rabbit hounds.

Whirling, he crouched, his gun moving in a deadly arc. "Up!" he snarled. "Lift 'em high. I'll gut-shoot the first fool that goes for a gun!"

As the hands went up, he backed off toward where Jerry stood before the hitchrack.

There was a furious thud of hoofs coming down the street behind him, but he dared not look. His mind raced, planning. The Plugged Dollar was separated by alley-ways from the buildings on either side. It was in one of these alleys that he had killed Jake Lavery. The hitchrack stood before the other. If he could keep

this crowd covered until he was on Jerry, he could get away between the buildings and be out of gun-range before anyone could mount and follow.

A voice ripped out behind him, "Look out, Walk!"

He snapped his head aside in time to see Curly on a lathered pony ride down a store-keeper across the street, who had leveled a carbine at him. In that split second the rifle exploded, and Walk snapped his head back to the crowd, in time to catch Seth Lavery lowering his hands to go for his gun.

His Colt centered on the man's paunch and Lavery froze, his hands creeping up again.

Walk backed until he had Jerry between him and the crowd. Across the street, he could see that the store-keeper had been knocked rolling and that Curly's horse was down on its knees, head sagging. The rifle bullet must have caught the animal in the chest.

He swung into the saddle and drove sudden spurs into Jerry's flank's. The red horse jumped six feet from a standing start and roared down the alley like the legions of hell.

CHAPTER THREE

Hardpan Hideout

ONCE clear of town, he headed straight for the Hardpan badlands. Looking back he saw the first of the pursuit burst from between the buildings, like bullets followed by puffs of white smoke. But he had no fear that he would be caught. The red horse had speed and bottom to stack against anything in the valley.

He felt a little concerned about Curly, but decided that the crowd would no nothing to him. He had just ridden in; had not known why the store-keeper was throwing down on Walk, and, as his partner, Curly would be easily forgiven for helping out. That put out of his mind, he settled himself to ride, pulling Jerry down to a pace that did no more than keep his lead over the foremost of the pursuers. No use in tiring him more than necessary.

Once in the hills, he wouldn't have so much trouble throwing off pursuit. In fact, there would likely not be any. The Hardpans were outlaw territory. It wasn't very healthy for a law posse to wander in there.

As far as that went, Walk knew grimly, it might not be too healthy for himself in there. However, that had to be risked.

Before half the flat country had been traversed, the pursuit thinned down to a handful of stubborn riders who appeared to be better mounted than the rest. Walk smiled thinly and let Jerry out another notch or so. Within a mile, even this little handful was stretched out over considerable country.

One rider, far in the lead, and magnificently mounted, Walk judged to be Seth Lavery.

Within gunshot of the hills he angled for the mouth of a sizeable ravine which he knew could not prove blind. Over his shoulder, he saw that Lavery had cut in toward the high country at a different angle.

It puzzled him for a moment, then he decided that his pursuer had not dared risk following him directly in country which offered so many opportunities for ambush. No doubt he hoped to cut his trail somewhere up in the hills.

With that in mind, he kept angling to the left, to avoid an encounter, and pushed Jerry hard. He had no wish to be forced to kill Seth Lavery. He had no quarrel with Seth, even though he disliked the man on general principles. And he still felt a little sick at the memory of that expression on Jake's half-face.

A few hours before dawn he turned Jerry loose, hobbled, in a small grassy

draw with a trickle of water from the rocks at one side. He watered the horse, tightened his belt a notch, and pushed on.

That afternoon, he lay on a high place and searched the country over which he had come. An hour's watching revealed no sign of pursuit. A little later he shot a rabbit and made camp for the night. With dawn, he pushed on again, higher into the hills.

He knew that he could go back to his and Curly's spread under cover of night, probably with little risk, and get what he needed, but somehow he found himself loath to face Curly.

He traveled on, lonely, trying vainly not to think of Jane, trying not to blame his neighbors for having believed him guilty of shooting a man in the back. The evidence was too much against him for even his friends to believe in him. He was outlawed now; beyond the pale. No doubt, they had even begun to think there was something in Jake Lavery's accusations against him. And Jane . . . At thought of her, the iron of bitterness ate deeper and deeper into his soul.

HE was in a mood for almost any kind of trouble that day, on the farther slopes of the hills, he ran into the cattle trail. He pulled up, eyes narrowed. The sign was old, but it was possible to see that a lot of cattle had been driven here. And it was too high up in the hills for that to be reasonable.

For a moment, his face hardened and his eyes were bitter. That wasn't any longer any of his business. Down in the lowlands, he could risk buying an outfit and then take the long trail for whatever future a wanted man might carve for himself. Following the back-trail of those cows lay danger certainly; more than likely death.

Then suddenly, the vision of Jane's father, Hank Carter, stood before him—short, square-jawed, grizzled, his face lined by worry which his twinkling fearless eyes tried to deny. For an instant, it was almost as though the man was there in the flesh. And then he felt again the touch of Harve Colton's hand on his shoulder; friendly, believing in him. And Curly's worshipping grin, and the warm voices of a dozen others who were his friends.

Suddenly, his mouth tightened. He swung his horse to the right, back-trailing the sign of the cattle.

He didn't stop to think that a week ago he would have thought twice before doing what he was doing now—thought twice and then not done it. The only sensible thing to do was to ride and give his information to the law. A posse might risk it; but it was certain death to a man all alone.

But the Walk Larson who rode up that danger-trail was not the Walk Larson of a week before. In the interval, he had lost everything he held dear—his good name and the girl he loved. And he had learned moreover a thing which may be good or bad for a man to know: that he was gun-swift. He had killed a fast man in a fight where the other had stolen the advantage. Some core inside him had hardened into steel, which had not been forged in that other Walk Larson.

As he rode, the idea grew more strongly in his mind that if he could trap the gang which had preyed on the valley for two years, it would make a great difference in his own situation. The man who did that would earn the gratitude of Okache County, and such a man might risk a murder trial where the evidence was against him. But more than that, he was a cowman, born and bred, with the instincts of his kind. And it was those instincts which drove him, rather than any consideration of personal gain.

As he rode, his mind was busy. Evi-

dently, cattle stolen from the other side of the mountains would have to be marketed somewhere. Brands blotted or vented, they could be driven down to some spread or spreads on this side, turned loose on the range, and absorbed gradually. He had a hunch he was on the trail of something big.

If he could become a member of the gang, he could not only trap the actual rustlers. He could get the men on the other end also—the receivers of the stolen cattle.

The difficulty was to get himself accepted by an outlaw leader who had demonstrated during the past two years that he was nobody's fool.

For three days, steadily, he back-trailed, without seeing the sign of a living being. Then it occurred to him, that he might do better to shoot his game and thus attract attention to himself. He'd make the outlaws come to him!

That idea got results on the fourth day—results which took a highly unpleasant form. Something snarled past his ear and spat viciously against the rock wall next to which he rode. And an instant later, the high, keening crack of a Winchester came to his ears. He resisted an impulse to jump Jerry for cover. Instead, he raised his hands over his head.

There was a slight movement behind a rock escarpment a hundred yards ahead, and presently, two riders, holding Winchesters, appeared from behind a bend in the trail.

THE leader of the two riders held his carbine on him warily. He was a lean, dark man, with a cast in one eye, three day's growth of black beard on his face.

When he had gotten to within three paces of Walk he snapped, "Who are yuh an' whut are yuh doin' up here?"

Walk grinned. "I reckon I'm lookin' for you," he said. "Anyway, I'm lookin' for whoever drove the cow-critters down this trail."

The dark man stared at him unbelievingly, then his eyes narrowed, deadly.

"Better explain yuhself, stranger," he snapped. "Yuh sound like yuh was askin' for a quick ticket to hell."

Walk lounged easily in the saddle. His hands had lowered by imperceptible degrees until they were shoulder high.

"I reckon you an' me'll meet there some day," he drawled, "but the' ain't no hurry about it. I'm lookin' for whoever drove the critters, because I figger he might use a hand. Me, I'm a fool for cow-work—when the's enough pay in it."

The man in the rear grinned. He was a grizzled, leathery hombre with a pair of wide-open gray eyes which somehow reminded Walk of Hank Carter.

The dark man still glowered suspiciously. "An if yuh pick the wrong place to work 'em in, yuh're liable to pick up some hot lead," he growled. "Who are yuh feller—an' how'd yuh git here. Talk up. We ain't got all day."

Walk looked at him. "Are you roddin' this spread up here? If yuh are, I'm ready to give up head until your ears flap. If you ain't, I'll ask you to kindly lead me to the boss."

"Why not, Blacky?" the gray man cut in. "If this buzzard's on the level, maybe the chief can use him. If he ain't, the big feller'll want to have a talk with him before he gives him his needin's."

"Mebbe you're right," Blacky growled. "From the look of him, though, I'd a sight rather beef him an' be done with it."

He kneed his horse up alongside Walk and reached for the latter's six-gun. The cowman's left hand lashed down, too fast to see. It struck the rifle barrel aside, ripping it from the outlaw's hand. In the

same split second, his six-gun appeared in his right hand.

"Take it easy," Walk cautioned the gray man, who had been sitting with his carbine across the pommel of his saddle and started now, too late, to swing it. "And back—you." This latter was to Blacky, who obeyed, cursing. His eyes ripped at the dark outlaw. "I'm too bashful to let a man take away my iron," he drawled. "It make's me feel right plumb naked."

He slid his Colt back into leather, while Blacky watched, startled and uncomprehending, and the gray man's eyes widened a little, with respect and a glint of humor.

"Yuh can git down and git that Winchester now," Walk said, his voice hard. "But don't try any more tricks with it. My patience ain't what it used to be."

Blacky looked at him, snarling automatically, but with dazed eyes.

The gray man puffed his breath out suddenly through flapping lips and then cackled with honest amusement.

"Son," he said, his eyes sparkling. "As far as I'm concerned yuh got a right to pack that there hawgleg of your'n until hell freezes. Blackie—git your carbine an' let's ride."

CHAPTER FOUR

Right of a Gunman

BLACKIE got down sullenly and retrieved his rifle, but he made no attempt to "play tricks" with it. He rode silently, with the others, both speech and belligerency whipped out of him.

As he rode, from time to time, he cast sidewise glances at Walk—glances at once questioning and full of veiled venom.

The trail led through a succession of constantly narrowing canyons, then across an open, coverless stretch toward what looked like a solid and impassable rock wall.

A guard on top hailed them as they got close. Then a passage showed suddenly in the wall as they plunged through a growth of brush. Following it, they debouched into a valley about a mile long and half as wide which made Walk stare in astonishment.

Circled by high rim-rock, it was as green and fertile as if the desolate malpai surrounding it were a thousand miles away. It was covered with lush, knee-deep grama and blue-joint. A stream ran diagonally across it, marked by a generous growth of willow, alder and cottonwood.

No cattle were visible in the valley, but it was immediately obvious that the place was perfect for holding and fattening trail-gaunted stuff before it was driven for disposal on the far side of the hills.

They crossed the valley and came to the head of the stream. It came out of a tunnel in the rocks which was barely head-high to a horse. Without hesitation, Tucson led the way in, his mount battling the rush of the current, slipping and floundering on the stones of the bed. It looked as though he were going in to drown himself in the bowels of the earth. Walk followed, side by side with Blackie.

Inside, he saw that there was a slight bend in the stream-bed and that it had eaten through the rock wall, so that for several yards it ran in the open again before it plunged back into the darkness of the rock. And that opening led into another, smaller, valley, which was no more than a kind of box-canyon, rock-enclosed. In the center of this smaller valley were grouped a dozen or so adobe houses, a corral full of good-looking horses, and two barns.

Blackie fixed his one straight eye on him with an evil snarl.

"An' now yuh've seen plenty!" he rasped. "Enough to send yuh out of here on the skids for hell. Yuh better pray to the devil that the boss takes yuh on. Be-

cause if he don't, I wouldn't give two-bits Mex fer yore chances of livin'."

Despite himself, Walk felt a tremor run down his spine. He knew that the dark outlaw had spoken no more than the truth.

He set his jaw. Nothing to do now but bull it through—and take what he had coming to him, if it came. Grimly, he determined that he wouldn't die alone.

Members of the gang, lounging around between the buildings, or playing cards in the doorways, eyed him curiously, but Blackie led straight to the larger of the adobes, where a stocky man, with heavy, powerful shoulders, stood in the doorway.

"We found this jasper back-trailing that last cattle drive, Grizzly," Blackie told him. "His yarn is that he wants to join up."

WALK'S eyes widened in surprise. If this man before him was Grizzly Hutton—notorious outlaw and killer—things didn't check up. Like everybody else in that section of the country, Walk had heard plenty about Grizzly Hutton, sometimes called the Pecos Killer. And brains never had been considered his long suit.

Hutton, originally from Texas, had begun his career as badman as a boy of nineteen, when he had shot a Mexican bravo in the back. Since then his career had been a series of killings, coupled with activities as a stage-and-bank robber and a rustler. Nearly every raid he had pulled had resulted in death for one or more people. Subtlety was not the mark of any of them. His method was simply to ride down on his objective, apparently, almost without plan, shoot up anybody who happened to be in the way, and trust to chance and his guns to let him get away. More than once, he had failed to get the money he was after, and a dozen times he had escaped capture because of the sheer, bull-headed clumsiness of his methods.

Studying the man's face, with these thoughts flashing through his mind, he hardly heard the question which snapped through the wide, close-set mouth which looked like a closed trap.

"Back-trailin' the cattle, huh? What yuh got to say about that, hombre?"

Square-jawed, blocky, brutal, with pale, dead-blue eyes, Hutton studied the newcomer.

"Well?" the man bellowed suddenly, thrusting out his jaw. "Talk! Who the hell are yuh?"

Walk started out of his abstraction. "Walk Larson's the handle. An' I'm lookin' for a job," Walk told him grimly. "Nothin' wrong with that, is the'?"

"That depends," Grizzly started to growl, ominously, then broke off, a sudden look of illumination on his face. "You the fella that ventilated Lavery down in Catamount?" he demanded.

"That's why I'm lookin' for work."

"Shot him in the back!" Blackie shot that out. "By God! A tinhorn dry-gulcher wantin' to run with the wolf-pack!"

Walk turned a bleak face on him. "It's a lie that I shot him in the back," he snapped. "An' you're a snivellin' bat-eared liar. Any time you're ready I'll shoot it out with you, an' give you first go at your gun."

The man called Blackie looked suddenly deflated. Walk could tell he was remembering how that six-gun had come out of his holster.

Grizzly Hutton interrupted harshly. "I'm handlin' this. What's this jasper doin' here heeled, anyway?"

The gray-haired man, Tuscon Tobin, answered that. He chuckled. "Because he objected some to bein' dehorned. An' Blackie saw that his unwillin'ness was backed by plenty of gun-swift. Blackie didn't feel like pushin' his augerment

further. That's why he still packs his gun."

"I didn't notice you doin' anythin' about it," Blackie snarled at Tucson. "If yuh'd a backed my play, like yuh oughter, it wouldn't uh been that way."

Tucson chuckled again. "Too fast fer me," he acknowledged.

Hutton's eyes narrowed. "So that's what happened!" he snapped. "A fine pair you turned out to be!" Then his face purpled with sudden anger as he swung toward Tucson. "An' yuh laugh about it!" he bellowed. "By God, I'm a mind to smash the damn grin down yore throat!"

Tucson's face sobered. His gray eyes looked suddenly like river ice. "I laugh whenever an' wherever it comes on me to laugh," he said, evenly. "An' I don't ask any man's permission fer it."

Grizzly's bull neck swelled, but to Walk's surprise, he did nothing. It was evident that he had no very keen desire to go up against Tucson Jim Tobin.

"Some day yuh'll laugh yourself into hell," he snapped.

He swung back on Blackie, before the other could answer. "Yuh got him here," he snarled, "I'll leave it to you to git him out of here—feet first. You an' this stranger was havin' some kind of augerment about his draw yuh said," Hutton clipped, clear-voiced. "Let's see yuh settle it, here an' now."

Blackie's face lost color. He hesitated, uncertain.

"I thought yuh made a rule against shootin' in camp, Grizzly," he objected.

The gang leader laughed brutally. "I'm makin' an exception," he said. "Pick yore own distance an' go right ahead."

The dark outlaw eyed Walk uncertainly, his mouth nervous. He was in a tough spot. A number of others in the gang had drifted closer, to find out what this parley was about. Blackie had either to go up against a man who already had him bluffed or else back down. If he did the latter, it would be pretty nearly equivalent to signing his own death warrant.

"What's the matter?" Hutton was demanding, jeering. "I thought you was greased lightning with a six-gun. Ain't turnin' yeller, are yuh?"

Blackie made up his mind, with an obvious wrench. "Hell," he said, swaggering a little. "If yuh want him killed—"

He swung on Walk. "This distance is all right with me," he snarled, malevolently. "Yuh poked yore own nose into it—so yo're gettin' it right now!"

Walk saw that he was talking his courage back into himself, and he did not underestimate his own danger. This Blackie bore all the earmarks of a killer. He must be a fast man and now, nervous, yet with his nerve coming back, he would likely make the fastest draw of his life.

That queer thrill was running up and down Walk's gun-arm. Now it flashed through with almost unbearable intensity, so that he half-expected his arm to jerk convulsively with it.

Some flicker back in the man's one straight eye warned Walk an instant before the draw came. Blackie's hands blurred to the twin guns sagging from his low-hung belt. He was fast—faster, Walk knew, than Jake Lavery had been. Swift and smooth, the guns cleared leather, with a little buzzing whisper, like the sudden hum of a wasp's wing. The barrels arced up in a fan of blue, brief as the beat of a lizard's throat.

THEN, and not until then, Walk's gun kicked against his palm, its blasting explosion shocking his ears. Twice. A sharp, authoritative roll of thunder. It echoed curtly against the wall of the canyon, then died, leaving the blue air somehow tense and brittle with the intensity of the silence.

The outlaw called Blackie jerked twice,

and then coughed once, wetly. The guns dropped from his hands. One of them, more nearly cocked than the other went off. He clawed a little at the air, then at his throat, and pitched forward on his face.

Walk whirled and turned with his back against the side of the house. He saw Tucson Jim Tobin, legs spread a little apart, up on his toes, his eyes blazing, hands near the butts of his guns. But he knew, somehow that the threat was not for him. His own eyes searched the rest of the crowd. Nobody had made a move toward his gun. The faces looked a little stunned.

His flickering glance took in the expression of Grizzly Hutton, standing at his side. The gang leader's eyes held surprise and respect—and something else which he could not quite read.

Walk said softly, turning his head squarely toward Hutton, and holstering his gun, "I reckon that makes a vacancy, don't it?"

Hutton looked at him and now Walk knew what that other expression had been. It was bafflement. Hutton did not want him in the gang.

"I figger to be able to fill Blackie's place all right!" The cowman's voice was still soft, but his eyes were hard, warning.

Hutton laughed, a little uncomfortably. "I reckon yuh've won the chance," he allowed. "We'll see."

Walk drew in his breath softly. He turned, relaxed, to the others. "Larson's the handle, gents," he said easily. "Walk Larson."

CHAPTER FIVE

Riders of the Law Brand

WALK took his place unobtrusively, even negligently, in the life of the camp. The other men accepted him with guarded, wary friendliness. He understood that that was not only because he was a stranger and relatively untried, but also because of the attitude of Grizzly Hutton.

The gang leaded had put no seal of acceptance on him. He was tolerating him and tolerating him in a curious way. More than once, Walk caught his flat, dead-blue gaze on him and read in it, not suspicion but puzzlement, as though the cowman constituted a problem about which he did not know what to do.

Two days after Walk's arrival, Hutton disappeared for a day and night. When he returned, his attitude had changed. And that was odd, too. Walk knew he had scarcely had time to ride to Catamount and back. What had he found out, then, which could change him?

That afternoon, while Walk sat in his habitual position with his back to one of the buildings, Tucson Tobin strolled up and hunkered idly down beside him.

An unspoken friendship had sprung up between the two men. Walk would have liked the older outlaw in any case, but he remembered, also, Tucson's alertness the moment after he had killed Blackie, and he knew without being told that Tucson had been ready to protect Walk's back in case anyone had been dissatisfied with the outcome of the affair.

Walk laid aside the stick he had been whittling and began to build a cigarette.

"I notice yuh been watchin' yore step," the older man drawled casually. "I wouldn't quit it none now."

Walk narrowed his eyes, licking the cigarette carefully.

"Didn't figger to," he murmured. "Any special reason?"

Tucson spat accurately at a beetle which was staggering along in the dust. The beetle rolled over, discomfitted, legs fanning the air.

"This jasper ain't as smart as some I

know," he said, at length. "Yuh had him kind of buffaloed, but he's gone an' found somethin' out. From the way he looks at yuh, trouble's due."

"Yet a man might believe that he'd just made up his mind that I'd do—an' was satisfied," Walk, who believed nothing of the kind, suggested.

Tucson grinned faintly. "Too damn satisfied," he muttered.

Walk nodded, sharing the grin a little. "Acts like a kid that's been coached how to put a cannon cracker under teacher's chair," he said.

Tucson chuckled. "Thought it moughtn't be needful to speak to yuh," he apologized.

Walk scratched a match with his thumb-nail and lit his cigarette. He inhaled deeply and watched the smoke come out of his lips with narrowed eyes.

"What are his methods, generally speakin'," he asked.

Tucson grunted. "He bulls ahead. When he don't, it's because somebody's coachin', like yuh said."

"An' who would that somebody be?"

Tucson rolled his chew in his mouth and spat again. "The big feller," he said grimly— "whoever *he* is."

Walk's eyes glittered suddenly under lids somnolent in the mid-afternoon heat. "Yuh don't know him?"

"Don't anybody know him but this here stuffed badman."

"He run the show?"

"Hell, yes. From some'eres down below, I reckon. Yuh don't think this Hutton's got the head fer it, do yuh?"

Walk said, "No," softly.

"Whenever it comes, it'll be dynamite," Tucson offered. He started to get up, as though he had said all he had come to say.

Walk's voice held him. "How come this Grizzly has got his knife out for you?" he asked.

Tucson grunted. "Because I don't take anythin' off him," he said contemptuously. "He knows better than to call me on it."

"How'd yuh git mixed up with 'em in the first place—if it ain't too much to ask?"

Tucson shrugged. "On the loose an' wanted to tie up with somebody. Heard there was good money up here, if a man could git in on it."

"An' findin' the' was, yuh stayed?"

"That," the older outlaw told him dryly, "an' the fact that it ain't healthy tuh try to quit."

Walk raised his eyebrows. "Like that, is it?" he breathed softly.

"Plenty," Tucson said.

TWO days later, Hutton disappeared again. When he came back, his manner was a little excited, and, Walk thought half-angry.

He called the men around him and said briefly. "We ride. Get ready—pronto."

Behind heavy lids and an expressionless face, Walk's mind buzzed. It had come—the decision he had dreaded. He had no doubt that the raid was to be again in Okache County. The cattleman in him revolted at the thought of taking part in a rustling expedition, and all his loyalty, half-buried but never destroyed, exploded into protest at the thought of helping to rob his friends and neighbors.

Hastily, his mind considered and rejected the possibility that he might slip away now, and warn the valley. It was a certainty that every move he made was being watched. He didn't have one chance in a hundred of making his escape. If he did, the raid would simply be called off. The outlaws, impregnable in this hill stronghold, would probably never be caught. Moreover—and this consideration was stronger than any other

—the mysterious boss of the whole scheme, would still be free.

Grimly, he set his jaw. It was too early to act. He had to get the confidence of the gang. He had to find out, someway, who the man below was. Those two things done, he could set his trap—make a clean sweep.

In the light of this chance to serve the valley, his bitterness seemed trivial—childish. Nobody down there had done him any harm. The manner of the Lavery killing had been merely hard luck. And in that moment of decision he knew clearly that he cared more for his friends, more for the peace and prosperity of Okache County than he did for himself. Someway, he would contrive it so that the cattle he had helped rustle that night would not be permanently lost to their owners. Someway he'd find a plan to rid the valley of this scourge which had already bled it almost white. That done, he'd ride out again—his debt of friendship paid.

There was no hesitation in him. The hand had been dealt him—he meant to play it to the end. If he lost—at least he'd go out with at least one man's respect—his own. He'd have been Walk Larson, clear to the finish.

THE camp was in a fever of preparation, hurried, apparently confused, but really swift and orderly. Within fifteen minutes of Grizzly's order, the cavalcade of two dozen men was in motion, armed, ammunitioned and equipped with emergency rations.

Walk rode between two men who had evidently been detailed to watch him. He had seen Hutton call them aside, and the promptness and grimness with which they took their places on either side of the stout leader made it clear what their instructions had been. Walk smiled thinly to himself. If he wanted to get away, it wouldn't be two such men as these who would stop him.

Ahead, he caught Tucson's eye, with a comprehending twinkle in it. The old outlaw also rode flanked by two men. He wondered if that, too, had been by arrangement.

Sunset found them still in the hills, but by ten o'clock the unbroken width of the star-filled horizon told Walk that they had hit the valley floor.

Grizzly called a halt, divided the party into four sections, and gave each their instructions separately.

To his relief, Walk was detailed with a group which was to hit spreads at the other end, the Lavery ranch included. Grizzly himself led this outfit.

Walk marvelled at the swift sureness with which the work went on. There wasn't any doubt whatever that the men of the gang were cowmen to their finger tips, or that whoever had planned the raid had done it methodically and in minute detail. The ZBR outfit had rounded up a sizeable herd for early delivery before fall, and these were guarded by night herders. Hutton, it was evident, had even been given the names of the two men on guard, and those who were to relieve them. He and one of his men rode up, hailing them amiably. There was a moment of low-toned conversation, and then some rapid pistol shots. A couple of men were detailed to dig some graves. . . .

It was a big gather. Hutton worked them hard until nearly dawn. And when the gang assembled again near the hills, they had almost more cattle than so many men could drive.

After that, the work was just as methodical. Half a dozen men were left as rear-guard, while the rest punched the cattle along. The men of the rear guard, Walk saw, were armed with the new, high-powered army rifles. Nested up in the rocks, they could hold off pursuit in-

definitely. They dropped off at a point where a high-walled canyon widened into a kind of natural amphitheater, perhaps half a mile long and without cover for those who would cross it.

From the description, he recognized it as the spot where the first posse from the valley, following the trail of stolen cattle, had been ambushed and virtually massacred.

Held here, by riflemen at long range, they had retreated toward where the canyon narrowed, to meet a withering fire from the rear. Of a score of pursuing valley ranchers, only five men had gotten back to tell the tale, among them Sheriff Dan Wesley, carrying wounds which had done much to age and slow him up. Walk, driving the first batch of his own cattle to the railroad, had not been on that posse.

The drive went on slowly, all that day and the next, without sign of pursuit. Some of the cattle which had not been in good condition at the start, Hutton ordered cut out and held, while the others were to be driven on.

To his surprise and disappointment, Walk was detailed with Tucson. They were among those who would stay and ride herd on the stuff left behind. They took over the line-camp that the two ZBR punchers had occupied.

When the others had gone, the pair looked at one another, Walk remembering a flicker of something very like triumph he had caught in Grizzly Hutton's eye as he left. With that, there had been a covert grin on the faces of two or three of Hutton's trusted men.

Tucson shook his head. "I don't like it," he said.

"Grizzly look to you like he had somethin' up his sleeve?" Walk asked.

Tucson looked at him, faintly surprised. "Him an' Drue an' Coahuila, all three," he said. "An' that ain't all. Damn near every man was packin' a heavier warbag than you need to take on that drive. An' more'n that, they've took most every cayuse in the corral."

Walk said nothing, his eyes thoughtful.

"An' how come they put us in charge of this left-behind stuff?" Tucson went on. "They don't trust me much, an' they trust you about as far as yuh could throw a yearlin' by the tail."

"The guards are still back there," Walk objected, thinking of the six men who had been left to protect the rear.

Tucson's eye was sceptical. "How come yuh know that?" he demanded.

Walk was silent. There were other ways out of the canyon than the one which led to the hide-out. There was no guarantee that the guards had not taken another.

"The's been somethin' in the air these last few days," Tucson said slowly. "It wouldn't surprise me none to find out that Grizzly was pullin' out. If he is, we're a-settin' right smack on top of that dynamite you was talkin' about."

Walk shook his head doubtfully. "I can't see him goin' off an' leavin' a hundred head of good beef," he objected. "It shore looks sorta loco. Unless he's havin' us watched, to see what we'll do."

"I can't see him leavin' these cattle either. Still, I don't like it. I gotta hunch, fellah. You'd play smart to fog it outa here while you got a chance."

Again Walk shook his head, his mouth set stubbornly. "I'm stickin'," he said. He couldn't leave until he'd found out all he had to know.

Tucson shrugged.

Then Walk's face brightened with a sudden idea. He might get the key to the bunch's destination, and at the same time find out who was behind this wholesale program of stealing and killing.

"Look here," he said, "I'll wait and give 'em a good start. Then I'll take the

trail an' see if I can't find out what's what. If you want to wait, you hole up somewhere. This stuff won't go out of the valley."

Tucson considered. Outside of their natural friendship, there wasn't much reason for his trusting Walk. The gray-haired man said thoughtfully, "There wasn't no reason for 'em to leave two men here."

"Hell," Walk shrugged, "what's the use of worryin'? Likely the whole thing is that Grizzly doesn't want us two to know where he delivers the cattle. You ain't been in this outfit so much longer than I have, have yuh?"

Tucson nodded.

But Walk was more worried than he was willing to admit. And he was still more worried next morning. He noticed then for the first time that not all the cows left behind were really in bad shape, and that nearly three quarters of them bore the Laverys' Tumbling L brand!

Here was something really to think over. Why were strong cattle left—on the excuse that they were weak? And why were most of them Lavery cattle? The Lavery's had suffered as much, or more, than the rest of the valley ranchers.

He could see no reason for it, yet merely because it was inexplicable, it bothered him more than anything else.

That afternoon, while Tucson took the guard of the rim, he went to the line cabin to sleep, still worrying about it. He slept fitfully, uneasy, filled with a premonition of trouble.

He awoke—to Uncle Dan Wesley's voice, sharp and harsh.

"Come, Walk—with your hands high!"

The voice jerked him into both consciousness and action that were lightning swift. His hand flashed to the gun on the chair beside him. He had it half out of the holster before it froze.

Sheriff Sam Wesley's guns already had him covered, and behind the sheriff stood other valley men, and their guns drawn also.

Walk shoved the Colt back into its holster and got to his feet. "All right," he said quietly, "I reckon you got me."

CHAPTER SIX

Home to a Hangnoose!

NOTHING inside him corresponded to his quiet outward manner. His brain spun in a dizzy turmoil—spun and reeled darkly under the realization of disaster like a crushing blow.

Outside, he saw Tucson, with his hands bound behind him, looking shame-faced and bitter.

"Sorry, Walk," the old outlaw said, his voice acrid with self-contempt. "I let 'em sneak up on my rear, like a wet-nosed tenderfoot."

Walk nodded. "It can happen to anybody, Old Timer," he said.

He forced his eyes to sweep the grim-faced circle around him. They were men who knew him; some of them were his friends. But there was no mercy in the look they turned on him.

Seth Lavery was there, and so was Ike, his arm still in a sling, because of the smashed shoulder Walk's bullet had gotten.

"Caught up with yuh finally, yuh murderin' thief," the latter snarled.

Seth Lavery said nothing, but his protruding eyes were triumphant and venomous.

Then Walk saw Hank Carter and Curly. It took all his courage to probe their gaze, to try to read what they thought of him. Carter's eyes met his. They were level, calm, with a question in them. But Curly's leapt to his warmly, sending him a message of belief and encouragement.

Walk felt his throat tighten and his

heart swell. He clamped his jaw tight, afraid that tears might come into his eyes. He was glad he had stopped feeling bitter about Curly. It seemed to him that he never would get over the pain of losing Jane. Every thought of her had been like acid on a raw wound. But, somehow, the bitterness had gone out of him. They hadn't been to blame—either of them. And now, in the face of everything, Curly believed in him!

His head went a little higher, and he looked at Hank Carter. "It ain't the way it looks, Hank," he said.

Hank said soberly, "I'd like to think so, Walk. Because it sure looks like hell."

Seth Lavery started to speak, but Sheriff Dan Wesley's gesture cut him off.

"Where are the rest of 'em, Walk?" he demanded, his face bleak.

Walk felt Tucson Jim's clear gray eyes on him, and suddenly there was bitterness in his heart. Now, disgraced in the eyes of everybody who knew him, he had to disgrace himself in Tucson's eyes, too. He wondered what he had done to be put in a spot like that.

For a long moment, he was silent. His hands moved unconsciously against the rope that bound them behind him. Then he spoke. "Which way did you come in?" he asked curtly.

"By that creek entrance. We was watchin' and saw him come out and you go in when he went on guard."

Walk nodded somberly. "Follow the creek across the valley," he said, "an' you'll come to a tunnel, a little to the left. They went through there with the cattle. You won't have no trouble followin' the sign after that."

He forced himself to meet Tucson's eyes. Instead of the scorn he expected to find, he read a look at once speculative and puzzled.

"Who's runnin' this gang?"

"Grizzly Hutton calls himself head of it."

"Where they runnin' the cattle to?"

"I dunno."

Seth Lavery sneered. "Tryin' to make out yuh ain't been with 'em long, huh?" And Ike Lavery growled, "A rope around his neck'll cure that."

There was an ominous murmur of assent from the posse.

"It'd be better for yuh to talk, Walk," the sheriff told him calmly. "We're not figgerin' on wastin' any time when we git to court."

Walk stared at him. "I told yuh I didn't know, Uncle Dan," he said.

"Aw, hell! String 'em both up an' let's git done with it!"

It was a Lavery cowpuncher who said that—a thin, hump-shouldered youngish man, whose twin guns and flint-like eyes stamped him as a gunman.

ONE of the posse, Hanemeyer, a stolid bull-dog type of rancher, and one of the early settlers in the valley, spoke up quietly, "He's right. The time to begin hangin' these rustlers is right now. As for Larson—he's been a traitor to all of us. I want to have my hand on the rope that hangs him."

"I'd like to see him kick, too," another said. There was a quiet, suppressed venom in his voice.

"Now wait a minute, boys, now wait a minute!" the sheriff protested uneasily. "These is my pris'ners. We might hold court right here, but can't . . ."

"Better keep out of this, Uncle Dan," Seth Lavery advised him. He had eased his gun out of his holster. In effect, he had the drop on the sheriff. "We don't want to rough you up, but we're savin' the county the expense of a trial. An' there's too many of us for you to stop."

Uncle Dan Wesley was no coward, but he was getting old and his feelings were

not with his principles in this matter. He knew that many of these men were on the verge of ruin because of the rustlers. For two years anger had gathered in them. He didn't blame them for not wanting to wait on the slow process of the law. And he had a strong hunch that resistance was useless.

"Listen," he began hoarsely. And then he stopped.

Tucson Jim spoke up. "If yuh're accusin' this boy of double-crossin' you-all while he was down in the valley, you're dead wrong. He ain't been with this gang a week yet."

"Hell," Seth Lavery interrupted impatiently. "Do we have to listen to a rustler lie? Let's git busy." He started back toward the rope that hung from his saddle.

"Yeah, that's enough palaver," Havemeyer agreed. "Git hold of 'em, boys. Let's git after the rest of the gang."

"Wait a minute" the sheriff interposed hastily. "The' ain't no hurry about gittin' after the rest of 'em. The's jest ten of us against twice as many as them. They'll be guardin' their rear and they know this country plenty. We'd just git ourselves killed, like the other posse I led into these hills. I wouldn't uh come this time, except for Seth here sayin' that he had got wind of a way to git here without runnin' into trouble. Like yuh know, we figgered they'd be holdin' the cattle here in this, the hide-out. But I wouldn't go after that gang without more men. Now that we know what they're up to, we can ride back, drum up a real posse and still catch 'em before they can drive the cattle anywhere out of these hills. An' I'm tellin' yuh fifty men ain't goin' to be too many!"

"Right yuh are, Dan," Seth Lavery said impatiently, "but that ain't stoppin' us from stringing these buzzards up!"

There were shouts of acclaim from the others. Rough hands seized Walk.

"Hey, wait!" he said, almost abstractedly, so rapidly was his mind working. Seth Lavery had led them here, his cattle left behind! Tucson was thinking Grizzly was pulling out for good. And then he knew, in a blinding flash of instinct that Seth Lavery was the under-cover man in the valley—the big boss—the brains of the gang!

"Stop right where yuh are, gents!" That was Curly's voice, singing like a whip-lash.

Walk's head snapped around. Curly's face was excited, tense, but the two guns he held were steady as the eyes of death.

"There ain't goin' to be any neck-tie party today," he snapped. "Walk's goin' to jail, for fair trial!"

Walk saw a grin of reluctant admiration on Hank Carter's face. The old rancher hesitated an instant, then—"I'm backin' that play," he said deliberately, his hands on his gun-butts. "Then I'm callin' on Sheriff Dan Wesley to do likewise."

And Uncle Dan Wesley didn't hesitate. "With everybody ag'in me," he said, flashing his Colt, "that was different. But if you gents ain't all votin' the same way, then that strengthens my hand some. Now if any of yuh start for yore irons, the' ain't goin' to be enough of this posse left alive to hang a picture!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Owlhoot Lawman

WALK paced the narrow width of his cell back in Catamount, feeling as though his brain would explode under the pressure of his thoughts. He knew now why Jake Lavery had run for sheriff. That was just a part of Seth Lavery's plot to get control of the valley and use it for his own crooked purposes.

Slowly, he recalled how the Laverys had acquired control of the bank—the bank which held the paper of men who had been weakened and nearly ruined by the rustling. With the sheriff's office to back his hand, and the bank to foreclose the mortgages, nothing would now stand between Seth and eventual cattle empire.

Walk's gun-speed had balked that plan temporarily by killing Jake; it had left Dan Wesley in office because there was no one immediately available to take his place.

And Walk began to see what had happened after his arrival at the outlaw hide-out. Grizzly Hutton bluffed by the ease with which Walk had killed Blackie, had been afraid to go after him openly. Walk had seen that he held only an uncertain hold on the hard crowd he headed, especially since Tucson had obviously been ready to back Walk's play.

Hutton's only chance was to have Walk dry-gulched, but that had held difficulties, too. Walk didn't leave his back unprotected, in the first place. In the second, that kind of killing might have seriously hurt Hutton's prestige. It would have shown too clearly that he was afraid to match guns with the newcomer.

Walk could imagine the conference between Seth Lavery and Grizzly over this problem. Luckily, the difficulty had coincided with Seth's decision to pull out of the dangerous game he had been playing for two years. The rustling had already served his purpose to a large degree. The valley men were getting desperate enough to do anything to stop it, especially after the near wipe-out of the first posse. Every day it went on increased the risk to Seth. It was better to get out with his profits and the certainty that a hard season would send spread after spread dropping into his outstretched hands, than it was to risk losing everything by keeping on.

He must have plotted with Grizzly for one last big round-up which would kill two birds with one stone. Walk would be left behind, to be caught with a small number of cattle, and would be strung up before he could do any talking, even if he knew anything to talk about.

Walk guessed that it was exactly the kind of scheme which most appealed to Seth Lavery. But Seth had made two bad mistakes. His greed had led him to order that most of the cattle left behind be his own, thus diminishing his losses—for rustled cattle could not be sold as high as honest stuff—and he had himself assumed the responsibility of leading the posse to the abandoned hide-out. Those two things had given him away to Walk, and Curly's unexpected play had spoiled Seth's plan for an immediate hanging.

Walk whispered his diagnosis to Tucson in the next cell, then called for Dan Wesley.

"Listen, Uncle Dan," he said tensely when the sheriff finally appeared. "I got to talk an' you got to listen."

Outside the iron bars, Dan Wesley made a gesture of impatience. "Let it wait," he growled. "I was just comin' to see yuh, anyways. I got to git you two out of here. Some of that crowd that was with us today has started lynch talk. The town's pretty well het up. I'm takin' yuh over to the jail at Benson City."

"To hell with that!" Walk ripped out savagely. "This can't wait."

Words, long damned up, tumbled out of him. He told the truth of what happened between him and Jake Lavery. He recounted how he had found the trail of the cattle, and why he had joined Grizzly's gang. He rapped out the facts he had learned from Tucson about the "big boss". And then he summarized swiftly his reasons for believing that Seth Lavery was the man.

"I'm not important in this, one way or

the other," he finished urgently, "but you've got to do somethin' about Lavery, an' you've got to trap Grizzly Hutton with the cattle."

The old sheriff had listened to him with astonishment openly tinged with scepticism. Now he said, somewhat drily, "It's a pretty thin yarn, son. Mebbe it's true an' mebbe not. But if it is, I still got nothin' on Seth Lavery, who's a well-known an' respected rancher, except the words of a man that's supposed to have shot another in the back an' that has been caught red-handed with stolen cows. Hell, I can't go very far with that, Walk."

Walk's hands clenched so tightly that his nails bit into the palms of his hands. Anger, impotent and helpless, raged in him like a fire.

Tucson spoke up from his cell. "I can pretty near vouch for what he says, sheriff. If yuh'd seen him gun Blackie down, yuh'd be willin' to believe he was too fast for this Jake hombre. An' I know he wasn't with the gang more'n a week. An' I know the' was a man below, in the valley here, plannin' things for the gang. Grizzly—"

Dan Wesley cut him off. "It don't matter what yuh know," he said impatiently. "Ain't nobody goin' to take the word of a rustler for anythin'. Git me proof an' I'll—"

"Proof?" Walk exploded. "How in hell are we goin' to get you proof when we're locked up in jail?"

The sheriff shrugged. "Yuh can't" he acknowledged stubbornly. "I'm ridin' on the trail of this Grizzly Hutton tomorrer. If we git him an' he talks. . . . "

"You're not goin' to get him," Walk snapped. "Don't you see, you fool, that Seth wouldn't risk gettin' him caught. Those cattle will be delivered, brands blotched an' changed, or forged bills of sale made out, before you can get there." The old lawman's face flushed. That talk don't stop this hang-knot none," he growled. "I'm takin' you two out of here—if the's still time."

But Walk was no longer listening. His whole being had stiffened in a sudden agony of suspense. He fixed his gaze on the floor, not daring to look out into the outer room, where Lanky Jones, the deputy, lazed at his desk, his big ears intent on the conversation. For, behind Lanky, two forms had appeared silently in the open doorway—a man and a girl. Both had drawn guns in their hands.

IT couldn't have been more than half a second that Walk stood there, frozen; his heart pounding with sudden hope, but the time seemed endless to him.

Then Curly's voice said quietly to the sheriff, "Don't you move. Don't move, unless you crave a boot-hill ticket."

Involuntarily, Uncle Dan's head started to turn, while his hands moved toward his guns. But something in Curly's voice stopped both movements before they had gone far.

Walk looked up to see Jane swing the door shut behind her. The muzzle of one of Curly's guns rested against the back of the neck of a white-faced deputy; the other covered the sheriff over the deputy's shoulder.

"Now yuh can turn around, Sheriff," Curly said.

The sheriff turned.

"Reach over, careful, an' unbuckle yore gun-belt."

The sheriff obeyed. The gun-belt with its weapons dropped to the floor.

When the deputy had been similarly disarmed, Curly faced them into a corner and took the keys from the sheriff and handed them to Jane.

The girl came to the cell door with her eyes shining. "Walk!" she breathed, as though seeing him was a miracle.

Walk stared, dazed, his heart doing

absurd gymnastics. She was looking at him as though she wanted to eat him up—as though he were the only thing in the world. But that couldn't be. She was Curly's girl now. He was imagining things—things which would make a fool of him.

He fought savagely to control his features. "Hello, Jane," he said in what he meant to be a casual, friendly voice, but which the struggle inside him made tight and cold.

The girl's face changed—a little as though she had been slapped unexpectedly—and her eyes were bewildered. But she recovered herself quickly. The key turned in the lock.

"We'll have to hurry, Walk," she said stiffly. "They're coming right now, with ropes and guns and a battering ram."

Walk forced himself to say gruffly, "Give me the key, so I can let Tucson out." Then he turned toward the older outlaw's cell, "I reckon you don't think much of me, Tucson, after what you've heard. But anyway, I meant to get you clear before I turned the gang in."

"Son, I believe it," Tucson told him serenely. "As to the rest of it—every man to his own game. I'm not blamin' yuh any."

Curly said urgently, "Hurry, Walk. We got to get Uncle Dan an' Jones tied up pronto!"

Walk moved swiftly, but coolly. With the sudden realization that he was free again, a cold, savage resolution had formed in him. What Dan Wesley had been unwilling to try, he meant to do. Whether it meant his ultimate hanging or not, he was going to trap Grizzly Hutton and wring the truth out of Seth Lavery!

As he helped bind and gag the two lawmen, he talked rapidly, sketching the situation.

"The's two hundred miles of country the other side of the mountains where the cattle might be goin'," he ended. "But I'm figgerin' that the place is the shortest possible drive down from the hide-out. It'd have to be, if they was willin' to risk a posse gettin' in there that quick. What you got to do, Curly, is find out what they're headin' for—likely it'll be in Commanche County—an' telegraph the sheriff there in Dan Wesley's name, to come out with his own posse and cut those buzzards off. That'll give our posse from this end time to come up with 'em. Pinched between the two, they'll be caught. Me, I got other mules to skin."

"Where you goin?" Curly demanded.

"To Lavery's," Walk clipped grimly. "I'm gettin' the deadwood on that Seth. But damned if I know how!"

CURLY looked stubborn. "Then Jane'll have to do the investigatin' an' send the wire," he said. "I'm goin' with you."

Walk reached out and grasped his hand. "That goes, partner," he said softly. "I haven't had time to thank you yet—or you, Jane—but I guess you know what I feel."

He turned to Tucson and put out his hand. "So long to a square hombre," he said.

"Hold on—wait a minute," the old outlaw said. "I didn't talk to the posse because I wasn't shore then that it was the double-cross. But I'm givin' up head now. Them cows are always drove to Buckleville an' loaded straight onto a train. Grizzly, or Lavery, has a bought brand inspector there. The stuff goes straight to market. Commanche County's seat's forty miles away, but if Miss Jane telegraphs the sheriff there, he can grab the outfit when they come in to load."

Walk's eyes gleamed. "You hear that, Jane? Get busy, gal. Thanks, Tucson—an' so long. You can grab Jane's horse

if they didn't bring one for you, an' hit for the hills."

"Jane's horse, hell!" Curly said. Tucson's got the best bronc in Hank's string. We figgered you wasn't the kind to run out on a saddle-pard in jail."

Tucson's mouth was suddenly grim under his grizzled mustache. "An I'm not ridin' for the hills, neither," he announced. "I'm stickin' with you. I owe this Lavery a little somethin' on my own account."

An instant later, four figures, one by one, slipped out of the back door into the shadows where the horses waited,

Jane mounted, reached up a timid hand and laid it softly on Walk's arm. "Good luck, Walk," she breathed, and then turned her horse sharply toward the telegraph office.

Walk sat an instant, staring after her, then he too turned and started toward the Tumbling L.

For the most part they rode in silence, two grim men and a hot-hearted, loyal youngster, who knew enough to keep quiet because the others did.

Once Walk asked, "Were the Laverys in town tonight?"

Curly nodded, "Both of 'em, an most of their men. It was them that was workin' up the lynch talk. I think they was just waitin' for Uncle Dan to get out, but he kept stickin' aroun'. He'd already sent out men to get a posse ready to ride in the mornin'. An' I reckon he must have smelt trouble."

A little later, Walk said, "If this thing goes wrong in any way, you're goin' to have to keep clear of the county until feelin' dies down, Curly. Then I want you to promise me to come back and stand trial. They won't do much to you, an' it's better'n runnin' outside the law."

And Curly's answer came stubborn through the darkness, "If you're outside the law, amigo, I want to be."

Walk wanted to tell him that he needed to think of Jane, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to talk of that, with Tucson to hear.

Near the Lavery ranch house they slowed up, and finally left their horses tethered some distance away, coming up softly on foot. A light burned in the Chinese cook's quarters over the kitchen, and another in the bunkhouse. The house itself was dark.

Walk led them swiftly to the porch and exclaimed softly with satisfaction when the door proved to be unlocked.

Seth Lavery's office was on the opposite side of the house from the bunkhouse, and without hesitation Walk entered and lit the lamp.

As he shot his first hasty glance around the room, he realized suddenly what a slim hope of success he had. A heavy iron safe occupied one corner of the room, and it was securely locked. Nothing less than a charge of dynamite would open it.

His heart sank. Any incriminating evidence would surely be in that safe. And he remembered, with a sudden curse, that Dan Wesley knew where he was going. The sheriff had been bound and gagged, but he wasn't deaf. The minute anybody rescued him, he'd be out here with a posse.

He flung himself hastily at the desk, running through the papers on top and in the drawers. Nothing. Then, in the bottom of the last drawer, his eyes fell on a little red memorandum book. He opened it. . . .

A thud of hoofs sounded on the road from town, but he was too absorbed for the moment to hear. The others, watching the gleam in his eyes, and seeing the triumphant slap of his hand on the desk top, missed that soft sound also.

"Look here," he said excitedly, "It's a tally book! By God, we've got what we come for!"

They closed around him, looking over his shoulder, to read the page he held out for them. The figures were scrawled, but clear.

"Look at that date," Walk breathed. "Remember, Curly—July 7th? That was the date of one of the first big raids. I remember it, because it was the day before we got back from that Fourth of July bust in Taylor City. That was the time Hank Carter figgered they had got near five hundred head of his prime beef stuff. An' here it is—482 Bar BC. An' here's our own brand, with 15 head tallied. An' Colton's Three C Connected; an'. . . . " Nobody heard the soft whisper of boot leather on the floor outside the door. " . . . he's even marked down what they worked the brands into. The—"

"Drop that book, and reach!"

It was Seth Lavery's voice, harsh and vibrating, like the song of a diamondback's rattles.

WALK felt, rather than saw, Curly and Tucson give back, turning their hands going up, toward the doorway. For a split second, he sat tense, unmoving. And in that second, he saw a gun, backed by a dim face, at each of the windows.

He put his hands up shoulder high. His back was to the door and he could not see the men there, but he knew from the sound of their shifting feet, that there were two of them. Two of them, not six feet distant, with their guns on him.

The chair in which he sat was a swivel affair. He got his heel on the swivel part and exploded into action. The heel-driven chair went hurling backward, straight for the doorway. In the same split second, Walk flung himself sidewise and down, rolling. Then the deafening blast of triple Colt-fire was in his ears; the bite of lead searing his flesh.

His gun, yanked as he fell, flashed up. He had a momentary glimpse of Ike and Seth in the doorway, smoking Colts in their hands, struggling to disentangle themselves from the chair he had sent crashing against their legs. He saw Tucson's twin Colts clearing leather in a draw which told why Grizzly Hutton had feared him; he saw Curly driving for his iron. Then his own Colt kicked against his palm, and all hell broke lose.

Ike Lavery grabbed his stomach, his jaw dropping open and his knees buckling as the slap of the lead took the strength from him. He was conscious of guns blasting from the windows, and felt the sharp, tearing pain in his shoulder as a slug tore through it.

The Colt in his hand roared and bucked, and roared and bucked again. Through the smoke he saw Seth Lavery plunge forward on his face. He was barely conscious of Curly's form spread-eagled on the floor, his blood staining the boards. Then he slung himself around, shoulder a flame of agony, to face the enemy at the windows—but somehow, there was no enemy there. The room was suddenly thick with smoke, and silence.

Uncomprehending, he struggled to his feet. Curly was down, blood welling from his head. Tucson, guns in hand, was weaving gently on his feet. He looked at Walk and grinned.

"Got the two at the winders," he gasped. "Neat—shootin'. Way I allus —wanted—to go—out." He coughed and blood came out of his mouth. "So—long—son," he gasped, and pitched full-length on his face.

Walk looked at him, dazed; pain gripped his arm. He went swiftly to Curly and knelt beside him, turned him over. The throb of the son's heart under his palm was strong and steady. Swiftly, he examined the head wound, saw that it was no more than a crease of the scalp. "Thank God for that," he said heavily.

There was a staccato, scuffling thud as racing horses pulled up outside. He got to his feet unsteadily, and stood waiting.

A quick pound of boots in the hallway, and then Dan Wesley was there. Behind him was Jane!

The sheriff stopped to survey the room. The girl brushed by him and ran to Walk. "Walk, you're hurt!" The cry had fear in it. Then she saw Curly. "And Curly! Oh, Walk—are you hurt badly?"

He stared at her with his eyes blank. Why was she fooling with him? She ought to be thinking of Curly.

"But—but—you're Curly's girl," he said stupidly. "I saw you kissin' him—in the pergola—the day I killed Jake."

She caught him fiercely by the waist. "Walk! I was crying on his shoulder because you were going to fight. I'm *your* girl! Don't you know it, you idiot?"

HIS knees felt suddenly weak. His brain felt too tired to take this in. He thought, "It's too quick to understand." And all the while, something like rainbow-colored flame of joy was surging up in him. He tried to take her in his arms, but his left arm would'nt move. He remembered he'd been hit there.

He grinned apologetically, "Have to make one arm do," he explained, like a fool. And then her lips were on his, and there wasn't any more pain or trouble or weakness in the world.

He felt her body tremble against his, then she pulled away from him.

"Curly," she said. "I forgot Curly."

He held on to her. "Creased on the head," he said. He'll be all right." She came back into his arms. . . .

Then, sometime later, there was Sheriff Dan Wesley's voice saying something that didn't sound important to Walk. It sounded like, "Jane come in an' cut me loose, after the Lavery's had ridden away. An' a feller outside, dyin' under the winder, says he saw that fight between you an' Jake—says it happened like yuh said. Seth Lavery knew it all the time. This feller told him. Chinless gent. . . . dead. I'm resignin' tomorrow. . . . Reckon the's gonna be a new sheriff . . . a weddin'."

Jane said, "There's going to be a wedding all right."

And Walk heard that clearly. He didn't have to hear any more right then.

THE END

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A BIG, GRIPPING NOVEL OF THE SOUTHWEST

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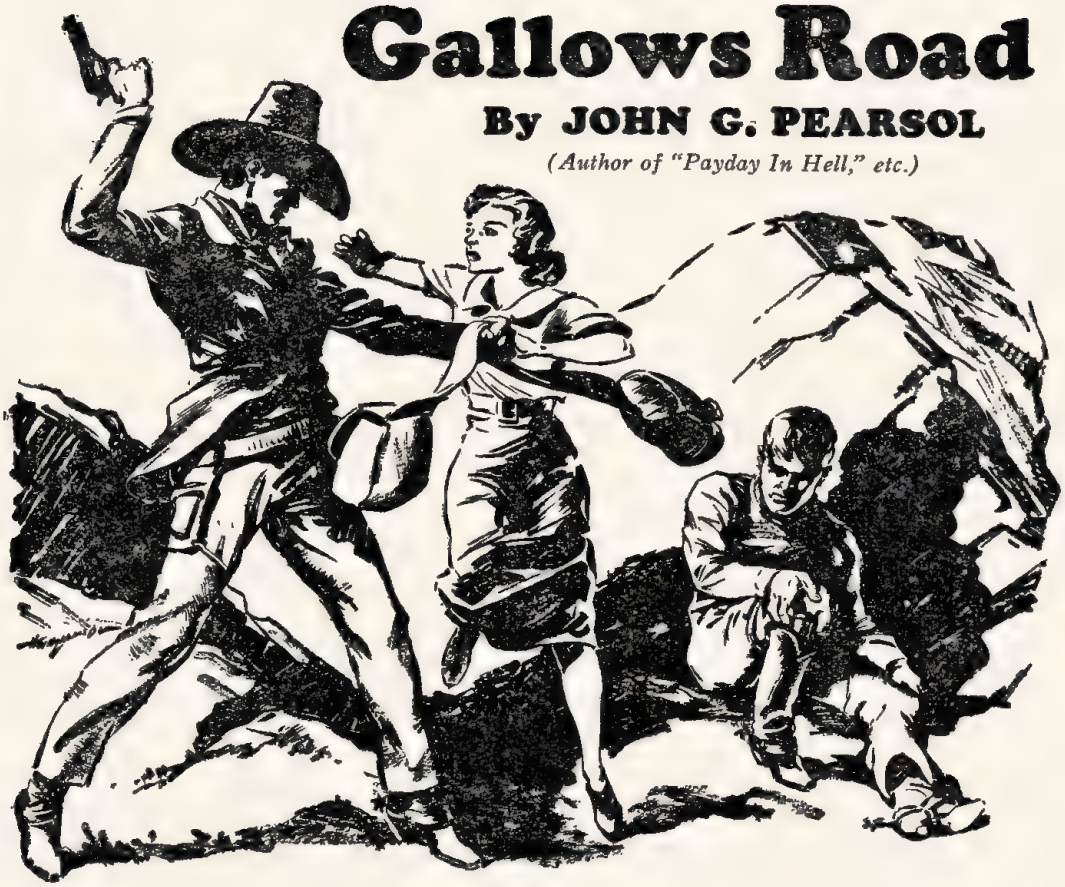

Some men make snake tracks every time they move. Others, like young Kid Barlow, walk upright, unafraid—though their trail may take them through hell to the gallows.

FIVE outlaws crouched behind the rocks in the basin at the end of the canyon. The sun was a brassy thing of fiery heat that beat down oppressively on these five in the basin. Before them a posse crouched in the rocks of the canyon, their rifles smashing caution to the five cornered men. Behind them a wide expanse of coverless country stretched, where their fagged mounts would be quickly overhauled by the fresher ones of the posse.

The five were trapped. They could stay in the basin and die of thirst. They could run and die when the superior numbers of the posse caught them in the open country. Or they could do one other thing that Dude Freeman had always told his men could be resorted to if ever they came to such a pass as this.

"I always got a way out," Dude Freeman told every man who joined him. "I got strings I can pull. You're safe with me. I get my tips from a big man, a bank cashier. I pay him off every deal we pull. You pay him off with a cut of your share of every deal. Then if we ever git in a tight, we got a way out. We're playin' the game safe, both ways from the middle."

Dude Freeman peeped cautiously around the rock behind which he crouched. He shook his canteen, heard no swish in it, then put it down beside him again. The four others watched him. Nobody

said anything, but they all looked questioningly at the black-eyed, hawk-nosed Freeman.

Big Blogin rubbed a massive hand across his eyes, blinked and looked about him in a dazed manner. He cursed softly under his breath. Young Kid Barlow watched Freeman with cold, gray eyes, licked his dry lips and eased his wide hat on his head. A bandage showed under the Stetson.

Whether any one showed their heads or not, the rifles crashed occasionally down in the canyon. The lead smacked against the rocks in the basin. The bullets and pieces of rock whined eerily off into space with their shrill, disappointed whine.

Dude Freeman looked them all over, from Kid Barlow to Slim Billings. Four tired faced, haggard eyed men, wounded, hunted, desperate. But there was hopelessness in their eyes.

"There's a way out," said Dude Freeman. "You remember what I always told you. I gotta pay-off man that fixes everything."

Big Blogin laughed, a hoarse croak deep down in his massive chest.

"Have him bring me a drink an' a fresh bronc," he said rumblingly.

Fire flashed in Dude Freeman's dark eyes for an instant. He looked around the semi-circle of men.

"One man can hold this end of the canyon," he said. "One man stays here—"

"So that's the kind of a dingus it is!" Slim Billings laughed. "I suppose everybody draws lots. The short man stays. The rest of us ride away. An' ever after we remember what a hell of a good gent he was, dyin' for his pals!"

"One stays," said Freeman. "The rest of us leave. The posse takes the one that's left. He gits sent to jail. My pay-off man gits him out." Freeman spread his hands expressively. "That's all there is to it," he finished. "He's already got the money. He's paid in advance. He'll spring the man that stays behind."

"You're forgettin' that you killed a man back there," Big Blogin growled. "That's murder. You can't buy off a murder charge."

"He won't buy off anything," said Freeman. "He'll buy prison guards. He'll have a rope, a saw, a gun, things you'll need to make a get-away, all delivered to you. A guard with plenty of money in his pockets will look the other way when you start. It's all fixed, I tell you. It's been fixed all along."

"It don't sound so good to me," said Slim Billings.

Freeman tapped his empty canteen, pointed out over the waterless waste behind them.

"Does that look good to you?"

A bullet thudded against the rock behind which Big Blogin crouched. Lead whined away into the hot desert air.

"What's the difference how you go out," asked Kid Barlow.

"Okay," sighed Big Blogin.

Freeman gathered up some sticks. He broke them off, left the tops of four sticking out over his closed fist. Slim Billings laughed again.

"You're out o' this, eh?" he asked.

"Sure," said Freeman. "I'm the fixer. If I had to stay, who'd know where to send word that somebody needed springin' outta jail? I have to be free to git to my pay-off man."

"I think it's a rannykaboo," said Big Blogin, "but gimme a stick."

They all pulled. Everybody's stick was long except Kid Barlow's. He looked at it, shrugged, smiled as he looked at Dude Freeman.

"I give 'em hell while you git away," he said. "That's the idea?"

"That's it," said Freeman.

Kid Barlow snaked a rifle along the

ground, turned over and poked the rifle barrel around the rock edge.

"This better be on the square, Dude," he said softly. "Either that or they better be dam' sure they hang me good an' snug."

"I'm sorry you feel that way about it," Freeman said, a hurt note in his voice. "I'll stick it out if the rest of you want to. Damned if I want to ride away with a gent thinkin'—"

Kid Barlow's rifle started speaking.

"Git goin'," he said.

YOUNG Kid Barlow sat in the death cell. He looked out at the dark, gloomy corridor of damp stone that he would see no more after tomorrow. Tomorrow they were going to hang Barlow for the killing that Dude Freeman had done so needlessly four months ago. Barlow smiled wanly. What a fool he'd been. What a fool even to join up with Freeman in the first place, just because Evelyn Brant had told him he was a nobody.

"Do something," she had said. "Be the best at something. The best good man. Or the worst badman. I can't marry a nobody, and work myself to death on a two by four homestead."

Kid Barlow smiled again as he visioned his ardor to gain money, fame, something to give him esteem in the eyes of Evelyn Brant. A desperate play—Dude Freeman—the basin at the gorge end; it all flashed before the Kid's eyes as he sat there on the cot, looking out into the corridor.

Four months ago the'd sentenced him to hang. Four months he'd waited for Dude Freeman's pay-off man to make his appearance with his promised rope, saw, and gun, and the money to grease the palms of guards.

Face lined, eyes cloudy, staring out into the dimness of the corridor, Kid Barlow sat and waited. He wondered what time it was now, how many hours of life remained for him. He wondered how Evelyn Brant would feel and what she would do or say when she heard that Kid Barlow had hanged by his neck till he was dead. He wondered why they moved the prisoners who were to die, up to this solitary, soundless place where there was no light, no suspicion of sound, where no other man could look upon their faces.

Kid Barlow raised his head then, like a wolf scenting game. His eyes glowed. His nostrils flared. He rose, stepped to the bars of his cell and sniffed.

Smoke!

He smelled it. His gray eyes squinted and he looked at thin oily streamers of gray that crept slowly up the damp corridor. The guard at the death chamber came past Kid Barlow's cell, pacing swiftly down toward the end of the hallway from which the smoke came.

A roar of subdued sound came to Kid Barlow, like the rumble of thunder; but a sound he knew to be the roar of a thousand doomed men. A door at the far end of the corridor opened, closed, and Kid Barlow heard that fierce, fear-filled bellow from the throats of the prisoners with an increased, a wild, shaking volume in that one second that the door was opened. He heard the clinking steps of the guard coming up the passageway again. But he could see nothing now through the dense clouds of smoke. He heard the guard fumble at the cell door, the key click in a lock. He heard the grate of steel on steel as the door swung open.

DIMLY, while wild thoughts of freedom flashed through his mind, he heard the guard choke on the acrid fumes while telling him gaspingly that he must go down the corridor, that the prison was ablaze, that five hundred men were trapped in the upper floors of the west wing. Moving through a dense fog that

choked, strangled, he went through the door that led from the death chambers.

Here a reddish glow mixed with the curtain of gray. A crackle, a roar of a different sort beat upon his ears and mingled with the cries of men. Blindly, eyes streaming tears, his hands groping before him, he stumbled on. Now the guard who had released him was lost from sight. The heat pressed upon him like the beat of a merciless sun. The rumbling roar mounted as Kid Barlow stumbled out into the huge prison yard, and the red glare from the mounting flames cast an unnatural crimson glow over huddled groups of convicts menaced by ready-gunned guards.

The smoke was thick, clinging to the ground, beaten down, it seemed, by the merciless heat of the flames. It shifted about, showed the blazing skeleton of a prison one instant, then covered it with a blanket of gray in the next. An inferno of heat, and smoke, and flame, in which men strangled, burned and died, screaming, cursing, praying. . . .

The smoke shifted, and in a red glare of flame a dark form leaped willingly, desperately from the upper window of the prison, to die suddenly as he crashed to the ground two stories below. A guard threw down his gun, ran toward a blazing door. He vanished inside, then came out again with an unconscious convict over his shoulder. A mighty roar of approval went up from the convict ranks as he turned, dashed into the door again.

Kid Barlow started forward, leaped toward that blazing building, where the screams of men rose above the roar of the flames. A guard stepped in his path, raised his rifle, then lowered it again.

"Go ahead Barlow," he said. "Hit 'er hard. Maybe God'll look at it different tomorrow, if you can drag a few of them poor devils outa there."

THEN the doors of hell seemed to open. Flames licked at Barlow as he leaped through the blazing door. He passed the rescue guard, returning again with another convict on his shoulder. Barlow covered his face with his arms, pushed through hungry tongues of flame that seared him like red hot irons. His mind whirled in the intense heat. He found a man over his own shoulder, but he knew not how he got there. He knew he was out of the burning building again, that the burden was off his shoulder, then that he was in the fire again.

Kid Barlow knew that the world was afire, that his eyes could see nothing but reddish haze. He felt nothing but searing pain. His ears heard nothing but the crackle and roar of flames, and the screams and moans of men. He knew only dazedly that he was saving lives, even while his own life seemed to be slowly burning from him. He felt as though his whole being was afire, that he trudged endlessly through a fire ringed door, carrying burdens on his shoulder, to dump them off in a smoke-filled yard, then to return and do this endless thing over and over again. He heard yells, cheers, a mighty roar from many throats that he knew greeted him at his each appearance.

Then suddenly, Kid Barlow found himself alone. The fire still blazed in the prison, the heat still beat on him with its merciless hands. But no dark forms showed on the floor about him. The cell doors sagged open, released by their automatic control. But no cries, no appeals for help came from their blazing, smoking interiors. He suddenly remembered that he was here, in a blazing prison, in a fire that could destroy a man as completely as it now destroyed the prison. He saw himself as those in the prison yard had seen him, coming into a fire, then not coming out again—

Kid Barlow staggered to the side of

the building where the flames roared fiercest. He looked at a wall of fire that he knew almost to a certainty that no man could get through and live. He backed away from it, then crouched and raced forward again. He threw himself at it in a fierce leap, outward and upward. He felt one awful, almost unbearable sear of pain that enveloped him from head to foot. It filled his lungs with awful heat, and he held his breath. Then he was through it, falling, hitting an incline outside the prison walls, rolling in that relaxed, limp way that lets bronc busters fall without broken bones.

Up above him, through his dimmed eyes, he could see the blazing prison, the fire flaring out above the wall over which Kid Barlow had just leaped. Painfully, dazedly, he pushed himself to his hands and knees and crawled away into the darkness while the roar and crackle of the flames grew fainter and fainter behind him. And Kid Barlow's pain-twisted face relaxed into a smile. Tomorrow they would say that Kid Barlow, who was to hang at daybreak, had gone into that blazing prison and had never come out of it.

DUDE FREEMAN let his black eyes rest on the impressive figure of King Colter, seated across the desk from him. Dude Freeman looked at the fifty dollar Stetson that rested atop Colter's proudly carried head, at the arrogant carriage of the big man. But Freeman didn't seem to be seeing Colter. He seemed to be looking through him, seeing something beyond.

"It's funny," Freeman said, "I remember what he said. He said: 'This better be on the level, Dude. Either that or they better be sure an' hang me good and snug.' "

Colter sighed exasperatedly. He looked at Freeman much as a parent might look at an unruly child.

"Why talk about that?" he asked. "We've cleaned up. We've made a fortune. I furnished the tips from the bank. You did the work. You had four men and you have every cent of the money. When we got ready to quit we got rid of all of them. Kid Barlow is burned to death in that fire just as sure as Blogin and Pinto and Billings are dead in the canyon, where we tipped them off to the law as they were coming in for their final divvy."

Freeman just shook his head.

"It's all over," Colter went on. "There's nobody left to squeal. We've got all the money we'll ever need. I swear, I can't see why you keep looking over your shoulder all the time, as though a ghost was behind you."

Dude Freeman smiled, looked at Colter keenly now. "You never seen Kid Barlow," he said. "He never seen you. Nobody knows you was mixed up in all these affairs. But with me it's different. I started this gang to clean house. I did it. But now I wanna go where I won't have to worry. If such a thing happens that Barlow didn't get burned in that fire, an' he happened to follow me here, what could I do? If I expose him, he exposes me. If I start fireworks, I either get killed or maybe kill him. But he talks before he dies. Or maybe they ask me why a convict was gunnin' for me. I don't want to fight any more. I don't want to die for my money. I want to spend it!"

"So what?" said Colter.

"So I been a fool to agree to this ranch idea," Freeman said. "I want my half in cash. I'm going to Mexico."

"And since we've already bought the ranch," Colter asked, "where will I get your full half share in cash?"

"Borrow it," said Freeman. "The bank will loan it to you in a minute."

"That's not the thing to do," said Colter.

"That's what's gonna be done," said Freeman stubbornly. "Either that or—"

"Or what?" Colter wanted to know.

Freeman didn't say anything. He just sat there, looked at Colter and smiled, while he rubbed the butt of the gun at his hip with his right hand.

"I didn't think you'd ever threaten me," said Colter.

"Did I threaten you?" asked Freeman. "I just said I wanted my half in cash. This set-up don't suit me. You're too fancy. You call too much attention to yourself, like this office in town, for a ranch that's ten miles from here. You still think you're a banker. But remember this: Our pardnership papers read that if one of us dies, the other gets the whole works."

"All except the quarter share that goes to my daughter," said Colter.

"All except that," said Freeman.

Coulter drummed the desk top with his long white fingers. His eyes watched Dude Freeman.

"So if I don't borrow the money and pay you off, something might happen to me," said Colter. "Is that it?"

"Something *might* happen," said Freeman. "You might think about it before you turn the proposition down."

Colter watched Dude Freeman rise from his chair. He watched him strut toward the door, his hand-stitched boots glistening in the sunlight that streamed in the office. And King Colter smiled at Freeman's back.

KING COLTER seemed to measure the distance that Dude Freeman now was from the open door. He looked quickly out the window, saw just one gent, a slender fellow, with worn levis, a black hat and a black-handled gun on his hip coming up the street. Coulter eased his hand in under his coat. It came out holding a gun. He lowered it, held it in his hand, called to Freeman.

"All right Dude," he said.

Dude Freeman whirled like a cat. His eyes saw the glitter of metal in Colter's hand. Freeman's hand moved with the swiftness of light. But Colter's gun was up, belching fire. And Dude Freeman's gun exploded as he lost his footing, as he staggered out the door into the street, his gun in his hand, still on his feet, but hit hard.

Colter watched, saw Freeman stagger, spread his feet apart and try to raise his gun. But Freeman's gun was raising in another direction. He was staring at someone just beside the door on the outside of the building. His lips opened and he called a name as he fired his gun.

"Barlow!" he shrilled.

Then Dude Freeman was blown sidewise by a blast of lead that swept him from a gun outside the office. Three shots rattled out almost as one. And Dude Freeman was smashed backward, pounded to the ground in an inert heap.

The clump of running boot heels sounded in the street. The form of the slender young gent whom King Colter had seen coming up the street paced past the door, a smoking gun in his hand. He bent over Dude Freeman, watched the life fade from his eyes.

Dude Freeman was gasping, but a peculiar smile was on his face as he looked up at Kid Barlow. "The pay-off man—is—"

Then Kid Barlow straightened, let his gun fall from his hand as a hard, round something jabbed him in the back. He looked up at the doorway to see King Colter, regarding him with an easily discernable gleam of calculation in his eyes. He knew a shot had been fired inside that office, but there was no gun in King Colter's hand now. Kid Barlow turned full around, looked at a sheriff's star on the vest of the gent who held a gun jabbed against him.

"Do some explainin'," the sheriff said.

"Why did you shoot Mister Drummond?"

"Who?" asked Kid Barlow.

"Drummond," the sheriff said, motioning toward the inert Freeman, then up where King Colter stood in the door. "Mister Colter's pardner here."

Barlow looked up at Colter again. There was a half smile on Colter's thin lips. He talked to the sheriff, but kept watching Kid Barlow.

"It happened so sudden," Colter said. "I didn't see all of it. But it looked like this stranger shot at Drummond just as he stepped out the door."

"What you got to say for yourself?" the sheriff asked Barlow again.

"He shot at me," Barlow told him, "So I shot back."

The sheriff snorted. "That's what they all say," he said. "We'll just lock you up for safe keepin' for a while."

KID BARLOW kept his tongue behind his teeth when they locked him in a cell. He didn't say anything about the shot that had been red just before Dude Freeman staggered out in the street. He wondered why they called Dude Freeman, Drummond. He wondered what Dude Freeman's tie-up with with this flashy dressed gent who had stood in the doorway. Kid Barlow wasn't going to do any talking till he found out a few things, about who could talk about him.

In a couple of hours the sheriff came to the cell door and told the Kid that Mister Drummond wasn't dead, that he probably would live.

"But you stay here just the same," he told Barlow. "If he gets well he'll prefer charges against you for assault with intent to kill. If he dies—"

Kid Barlow just nodded, kept his mouth shut. He couldn't tell the lawman that Dude Freeman and Drummond were the same man. If he did that, Freeman could tell who Kid Barlow was. The sheriff went away and in about an hour King Colter came in, stood at the cell door and looked for a long moment at Barlow.

"You knew—ah, Mister Drummond?" King Colter finally asked.

Kid Barlow shook his head. "Never saw him before," he lied.

He sat there on the cot edge, looked up at King Colter's face. It was a cold, hard face, a merciless face that was softened only by its evident polish and arrogance.

Kid Barlow wondered why this man would have shot Freeman, and then lied about it. If he knew him to be Freeman, then he must be of the same ilk. If he did not know it, why did he lie and try to fasten the blame on Kid Barlow. Maybe, thought the Kid, this was Dude Freeman's pay-off man. Maybe that's what Freeman was trying to say just as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

"And maybe you know a fellow named Barlow," King Colter went on.

Icy cold chased itself up and down Kid Barlow's spine. But he shook his head again.

"That's a new one on me," he said.

But when he watched King Colter and saw the faint smile that tinged his lips, the irony that glowed back in his eyes, Kid Barlow knew that King Colter was warning him to say nothing about that shot that had preceded Dude Freeman's coming out in the street. And he was sure that King Colter knew Dude Freeman to be Dude Freeman and not Drummond. It cinched the case that this flashy gent was the pay-off man, the big gent who gave the tips for Dude Freeman's operations.

"I just wondered," King Colter said softly. Then he turned and went down the corridor again.

KID BARLOW paced his cage. The acrid smell of wood smoke drifted in through the barred windows of his cell,

from the stove of some shack in Terlingua. It stung Barlow's nose, made the hell of the fire at the penitentiary fresh and horrible in his mind. The noose that had waited on him because of Dude Freeman's perfidity seemed to hang ominously in the corridor outside the cell now.

Barlow looked out the window, saw King Colter walking down the dusty street beside a girl. She was young, beautiful, and Kid Barlow's lips twisted downward. Evelyn Brant was beautiful too. Maybe this girl was Colter's wife, maybe she hadn't wanted to marry a nobody either. Maybe she—

Kid Barlow cursed, seated himself on his cot again, his mind bitter with memories.

Night came—then another day. Dude Freeman was better. The days lengthened to weeks. Barlow saw King Colter and this girl many times through the bars of his window. He heard that Dude Freeman, whom these folks called Mister Drummond, would be up and around soon. The Doctor had him in bed in the room back of his office.

Then King Colter stood again in front of Kid Barlow's cell. There was pain, anguish, in Colter's eyes. There were deep lines about his mouth. He gripped the bars of the cell, stared at Barlow long and silently. Then he handed a paper through the bars to Kid Barlow.

The paper read:

King Colter:

I've kidnapped Drummond and your daughter. I have them both where you'll never find them unless you do as I say. Release the man you have in jail. Bring $85,000 in cash and come with this man straight out the road toward Galena Springs. Start at daylight tomorrow morning. If I see a posse I'll kill Drummond and maybe your daughter will wish she was dead. And neither of you wear a gun.

Dude Freeman.

"I haven't shown it to the sheriff yet," said Colter, "but Freeman's got me. All I can do is just what he says, and keep my mouth shut. I know you know," continued Colter miserably, "that Dude Freeman and Drummond are the same man."

Kid Barlow nodded. "I know who you are too," he guessed. "I know you both are skunks."

The misery in King Colter's face deepened.

"But my girl," he said, "she's good. He's got her."

"So what?" asked Barlow.

"So Freeman can force me to pay him his half share he wants in cash. He wanted that just before you came here. That's what we fought about as you were coming up the street. You knew he was shot when he came out the door."

"And I knew if I said he was Dude Freeman, and your pardner, that somebody might say I was Kid Barlow."

"He wants to kill us both," King Colter said. "He'll get the money, kill us, and ride south with my daughter. We have to stop it—some way."

Kid Barlow laughed. "You're good," he said coldly. "You and Freeman cook up a scheme so that I take the medicine for somebody else's killings. You put a rope around my neck. Then you come and tell me that *we* have to go out while Dude Freeman kills us, so *your* daughter won't get hurt!" Barlow snorted. "She's probably right in her element. Let her go, for all of me!"

"What if I tell who *you* are?" Coulter asked desperately.

"And what if I tell who *you* are?" countered Barlow.

King Colter's shoulders slumped, like a man wholly whipped. He turned, started down the corridor again. Barlow watched him, thought what a hell of a difference it made when the load was on your own

back instead of some body else's. Then he called out suddenly.

"I'll go," Barlow told Colter when the flashy man came back and stopped again in front of the cell.

Colter's face lighted. He hesitated, then thrust his hand suddenly through the bars. Kid Barlow looked down at Colter's hand, smiled a cold and bitter smile, and kept his hands down at his sides. He looked up again, watched Colter's face flush, drop his hand and go slowly down the corridor again, still walking like a beaten man. And Kid Barlow wondered what impulse had prompted him. Why was he going out with Colter tomorrow? To save a girl, or because he wanted to get to grips with Dude Freeman and this double-crossing Colter?

What a clever devil Dude Freeman was! To walk out of the Doctor's back room pretending that Drummond had been kidnaped by Dude Freeman. To take King Colter's daughter and place both Colter and Kid Barlow where they'd do as Dude Freeman said.

THE night was long, filled with thoughts of Dude Freeman, of a girl who was the daughter of a man who had helped put a noose around Kid Barlow's neck. Gray came into the darkened sky. The sheriff came to the cell door, unlocked it and herded Kid Barlow into the outer office where King Colter waited.

"When an outlaw like Dude Freeman wants a gent let outa jail," the sheriff said coldly to Barlow, "that ties that gent up with him. I'm doin' as he says just to try an' help as good a gal as ever lived. But I'm tellin' you—the next time I lay eyes on you I'm killin' you like a snake. I'm gonna forget I'm an officer. I'm just gonna rid the country of a skunk that preys on good girls."

The sheriff motioned toward the outside where two broncs stood saddled. One was the broken down mare that Kid Barlow had ridden into Terlingua.

"I oughta have a gun," Barlow suggested, ignoring the sheriff's outbreak.

"Well, you don't get a gun," snapped the sheriff. "Freeman says no guns. I reckon he don't trust you much, with Colter carryin' all that money."

"I get a gun or I don't go," said Barlow stubbornly.

The sheriff looked at Colter. King Colter nodded.

"Give him one," he said.

Barlow took the gun from the holster that the sheriff extended and thrust it down inside his boot. Then he pulled his Levis down over it.

"You're foolish," he heard the sheriff tell Colter. "He'll put that gun on you when you get outa town, an' skip with the money!"

King Colter just shook his head, followed the Kid out and swung up on one of the broncs.

They left the town behind them and rode along the snaky trail that unwound slowly under their bronc's hoofs as the sun peeped above the mountain tops and painted the sky with streamers of rose, and gold and purple. Kid Barlow wondered why he didn't reach down and take the gun from his boot and lift that $85,000 from King Colter. It wasn't Colter's money. It was stolen. All of it, money that Kid Barlow had helped Dude Freeman to steal, with the aid of tips this crook of a Colter had given them. It was money that should have gone to pave the way for Kid Barlow's freedom when he'd gone to jail so that Dude Freeman could ride away to safety. And here was Kid Barlow, riding beside Colter, taking that money to Dude Freeman!

Kid Barlow's lips drew down in a bitter line. He laughed a harsh, cackly sort of laugh that made King Colter look strangely at him.

"I know what you're thinking," Colter said. "But you'd be sorry for it. You'd look back and remember that you left a good girl in Dude Freeman's hands. That would bother you. You'd never enjoy the money."

Kid Barlow laughed again. "You seem to enjoy havin' lots of money," he told Colter cuttingly. "And you left plenty of folks holding the sack when you grabbed it!"

KING COLTER didn't have an answer for that. He rode along, eyed Barlow nervously with sidewise glances. They crept up into the hills, and Kid Barlow wanted more and more to take the wealth that Colter carried and head south. There, in Mexico, he'd be safe, wealthy, powerful, like King Colter was here.

There would be no more posses to dodge, no more fear that some one would recognize him as Kid Barlow, the convict who was to have been hanged at Yuma.

The trail steepened. Giant rocks edged the winding ribbon of yellow up which their horses climbed. Barlow watched Colter, riding ahead of him now and thought how great a fool he was to ride into a ready gun in the hands of Dude Freeman, all for the daughter of a man who—

"Stick 'em up high, gents!"

It was Dude Freeman's voice. Colter was motionless, his hands high in the air. Barlow stopped his bronc, raised his hands. He looked over his shoulder and saw Dude Freeman's black eyes watching him from over the sights of a rifle barrel.

"Ease down," said Freeman. "Lead your broncs over behind this rock."

While they dismounted, Dude Freeman stepped out with a pistol in one hand and the rifle trailing in the other. He lined the two men up against a granite slab, felt over King Colter with a free hand after he had lain the rifle down. He patted the Kid's waist band, felt for a concealed gun, then grinned and stepped back.

"Where's the money?" he asked Colter.

"In my saddle bags," Colter nodded toward the horses.

Freeman stepped over, still facing Colter and Barlow while he reached up into Colter's saddle bags.

"Where's Eloise?" Colter asked.

Freeman didn't answer. He looked at Colter, then at the Kid. He stood there with his black eyes shining, smiling satanically, fingering the package he'd taken from the saddle pocket.

"Where's Eloise?" Colter asked again.

Freeman motioned with his gun, prodded Colter and Barlow around the granite slab. A girl lay there, bound hand and foot, a gag in her mouth. Colter leaped forward, undid the gag from her mouth, untied the ropes from her hands and feet. Kid Barlow smiled, that bitter smile again as the girl's arms went about Colter's neck and she told him she was all right.

"But tell me it's a lie," she said fiercely, "About—about—"

"A lie?" asked Colter.

Freeman laughed.

"I told her a little story," he said. "I explained how come I needed this coin; how come we happened to get it in the first place, and all about how we let Barlow, here, take the rap for us." He grinned mockingly. "I had to shut her up, Colter. She was telling me what a great gent her father was an' how he'd take the hair off my hide when he located me."

Colter was slumped, his face white and red by turns. He didn't meet the level gaze that the girl fastened upon him. The girl just sat there, stared with disbelief in her eyes.

"It—it's true," she said finally, softly, as though to herself.

Freeman laughed again. "Thought she

was a bit too good for me too," he said, "I had to take her down a peg, Colter."

Kid Barlow was stiffening. He saw a reddish fire come slowly into Dude Freeman's black eyes. He saw his gun slowly raise. He yelled a warning to King Colter, then dived his hand toward his boot top.

Freeman whirled at the Kid's yell. His lips twisted into a snarl. His gun flamed and Kid Barlow felt a sear of pain in his side. He toppled forward on his face, fell over on his side and lay there, stunned. His eyes partially filmed with pain and shock, he saw Colter dive forward, try to reach Freeman's gun hand before the gun blazed again. The girl screamed as the gun crashed. King Colter stopped his forward rush suddenly, as though he had run against a stone wall. He straightened, stiffened, then fell sidewise, clawing at his chest as he flopped to the ground. Freeman turned, saw Kid Barlow's hand clawing into his boot top.

He whipped up his gun again.

The girl lunged forward, crashed into him as the gun flamed. Freeman struck her cruelly on the head with the whipped up gun, flashed it downward again as Barlow pulled the Colt from his boot. But Kid Barlow's hand was heavy. His arm felt like lead. His dimmed eyes watched the speed with which Freeman's gun came down, knew that it was faster than the speed with which his own weak arm moved up. Desperately, Kid Barlow fired, even before he had his gun up.

He saw Freeman wince as a bullet hit his leg. He saw the gun flame in Freeman's hand, and felt the pain of the bullet hit his left shoulder. He saw the girl, up again, running toward Freeman, blood on her face where Dude had lashed her.

The Kid called to her as she lunged forward. He cried out as she leaped for Freeman's extended gun, grabbed and yanked as it exploded. Then Kid Barlow shot deliberately, an aimed shot that caught Dude Freeman just above the bridge of his nose.

JUST about out, the Kid lay there. He watched Dude Freeman, saw there was no movement of his chest, that his eyes stared glassily up at the blue sky. He looked over at King Colter, saw the gaping hole in his back, knew him to be dead. He looked at the pale face of the girl, her eyes closed, and saw the slow rise and fall of her breast. He looked at the bundle of money, $85,000, that Dude Freeman had dropped. There was a fortune in that package, a life of ease and security, there on the ground. He tried to crawl over toward the girl, but he flopped on his face when he tried it. The world spun dizzily as he lay there. He heard the girl stir after a while; realized that she was tugging at him, trying to pull him some where. But his eyes were too dimmed to see her. He felt her hands only as far, distant things. He heard her voice as a far away sound in his ears.

Then there was silence again. The sounds of horses' hoofs sounded, loud, then soft, as they faded in the distance. He knew not how long it was before he opened his eyes and saw that the girl was gone and that the money had vanished.

Weakly, Kid Barlow crawled toward his bronc behind the rock. Now he likened this to that awful night that he crawled away from the prison. His mind whirled in chaos as he thought of these past five months. He was tired, awfully tired, tired of running, fighting, dodging, crawling painfully away from places of carnage. He was tired of running away from a noose, of fearing that men would know that this was Kid Barlow. He felt upward and grabbed a stirrup above him. With a desperate surge of strength he pulled himself up with his one good arm. Somehow he managed to head his bronc down the trail, back again toward Ter-

lingua. The motion of the horse pained him, made the wounds in his side and shoulder ache and throb. He was tired of aches and pain, and weary rides. He wanted to stop, to tell some one who he was, and have them take him back to Yuma and the noose.

"I'm Kid Barlow," he said aloud, "take me to Yuma. I didn't die in the fire."

THE sun sank down behind the mountains. Gray dusk descended. Barlow rode slowly through the darkness. He saw the girl, Eloise Colter, her face dancing before him. He laughed crazily and still had sense enough to wonder why he didn't take the money from Colter before they got to Dude Freeman's hideout.

"You git money for women," he muttered. "You don't take it away from 'em an' leave 'em with a gent like Freeman."

He heard the sounds of wagon wheels in the darkness. He saw a dim shape stop beside him. He heard voices. Strong hands lifted him from the saddle. Then he seemed to bounce for eons and eons upon the straw-softened bed of a wagon. He opened his eyes and looked at the stern face of the Sheriff of Terlingua. He switched his gaze into the anxious eyes of the girl. She smiled and he suddenly realized that she was beautiful.

"How you feelin', Barlow?" the sheriff asked.

Barlow! The Kid stabbed an accusing glance at the girl. She smiled again, looked down at her hand as it lay on the Kid's, then took her own away.

"I've told him about it," she said softly. "About Dude Freeman assuming the name of Drummond. About father and Freeman. All about you and everything. I told him all that Freeman told me."

"I've sold the ranch," the girl went on. "And returned all the money. I have a few thousand dollars that my mother left me, and I'm going to buy a ranch in Mexico with it."

Her eyes searched Kid Barlow's. But the Kid looked back stonily.

"I've asked the sheriff who he thought would make me a good man to manage it," she went on, but looking now down at the Kid's limp hand on the bed sheets. "He said you might want the job."

"Me?"

"He said he didn't take much stock in you claiming to be Kid Barlow, because he knew that Kid Barlow was burned to death in a prison fire."

The Kid looked at the lawman, saw a faint smile tinge his stern lips.

"A clear case o' mistaken identity," the sheriff said. "I've seen lots of it, especially when a gent gits shot up some."

The Kid looked at the girl again. "You ought to know the gent you take to Mexico," he told her. "You should be sure he's the right sort of a jigger."

"There's a time in all gent's lives," the sheriff put in, "When he can make one of two kinds of tracks in the sand; either man tracks or coyote tracks. You had your chance when you started out with Colter carryin' all that money. Your tracks figgered up man size."

The sheriff rose, started toward the door. "I'll step out a while," he said. "Mebby after a while yu'll remember yore name. There was a standin' reward for Dude Freeman, dead or alive. Two thousand dollars, enough to buy a part interest in that ranch. But I gotta know what name to tell 'em to put on the check. Most anything will do except John Doe. He's about played out around here."

JOHN G. PEARSOL'S
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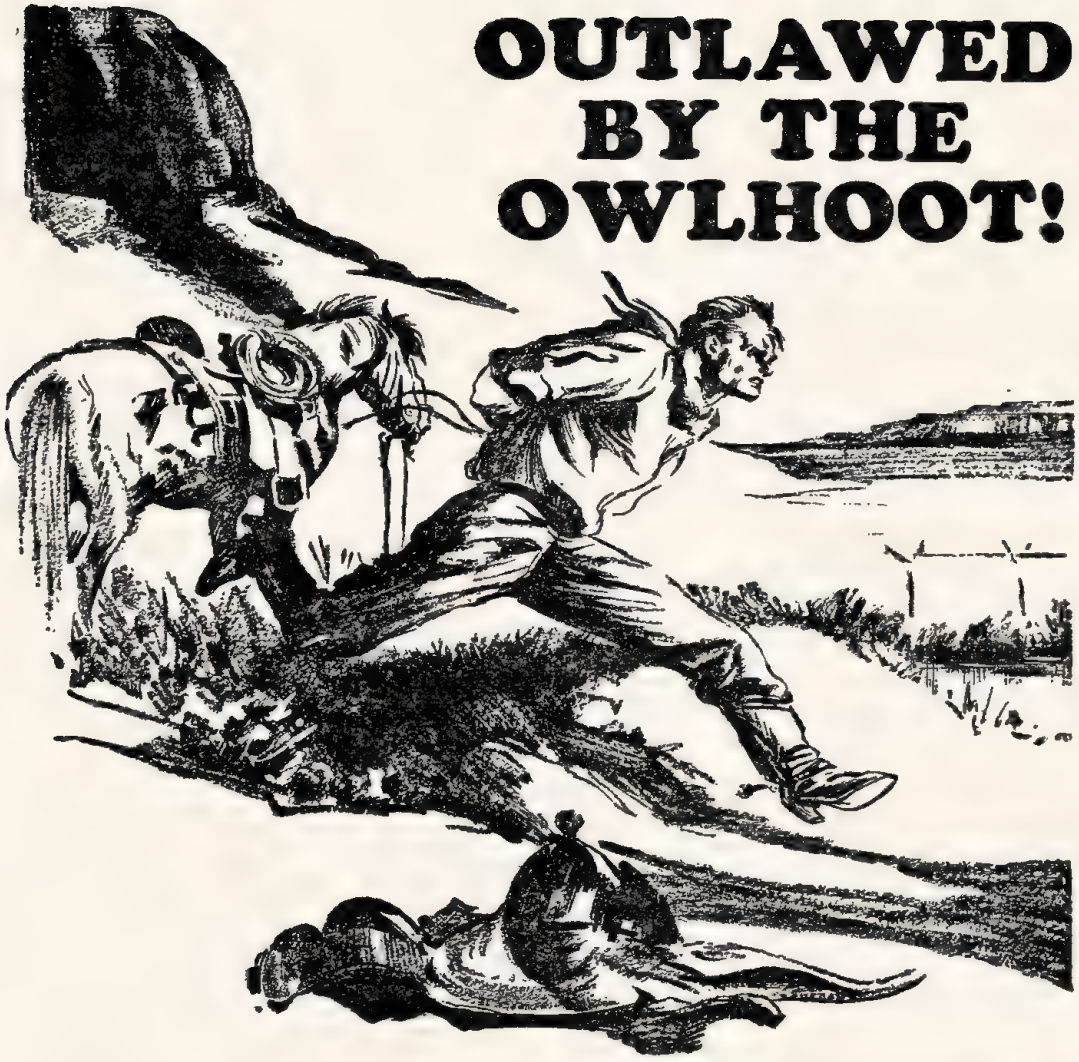
OUTLAWED BY THE OWLHOOT!



It was a girl who captured Ran Malone—to hang for a killing he did not do. But it was Ran Malone, himself, who fought for that girl when the tables were turned—who offered up his life to save her from his owlhoot partners—who battled with guns and blood and muscle so that she might live.

COYOTES were clamoring under the white moon when Ran Malone, following the faint trail left by Pardee through a notch in the low, desert ridge, saw a light glint not far ahead. Once only that light winked. It had come, Ran saw, from the window of a small adobe hut that stood there, apparently deserted, on the bare desolation of an alkali flat. Instantly he stopped his horse.

Ran pumped a cartridge into his unloaded carbine. Riding with an empty gun had been reckless and dangerous tonight. For hours each point where the shadows offered concealment had been a possible ambush. But old habits were hard to break. Ran Malone never carried a loaded rifle. He had seen a close friend die in the saddle when a gun had gone off accidentally.

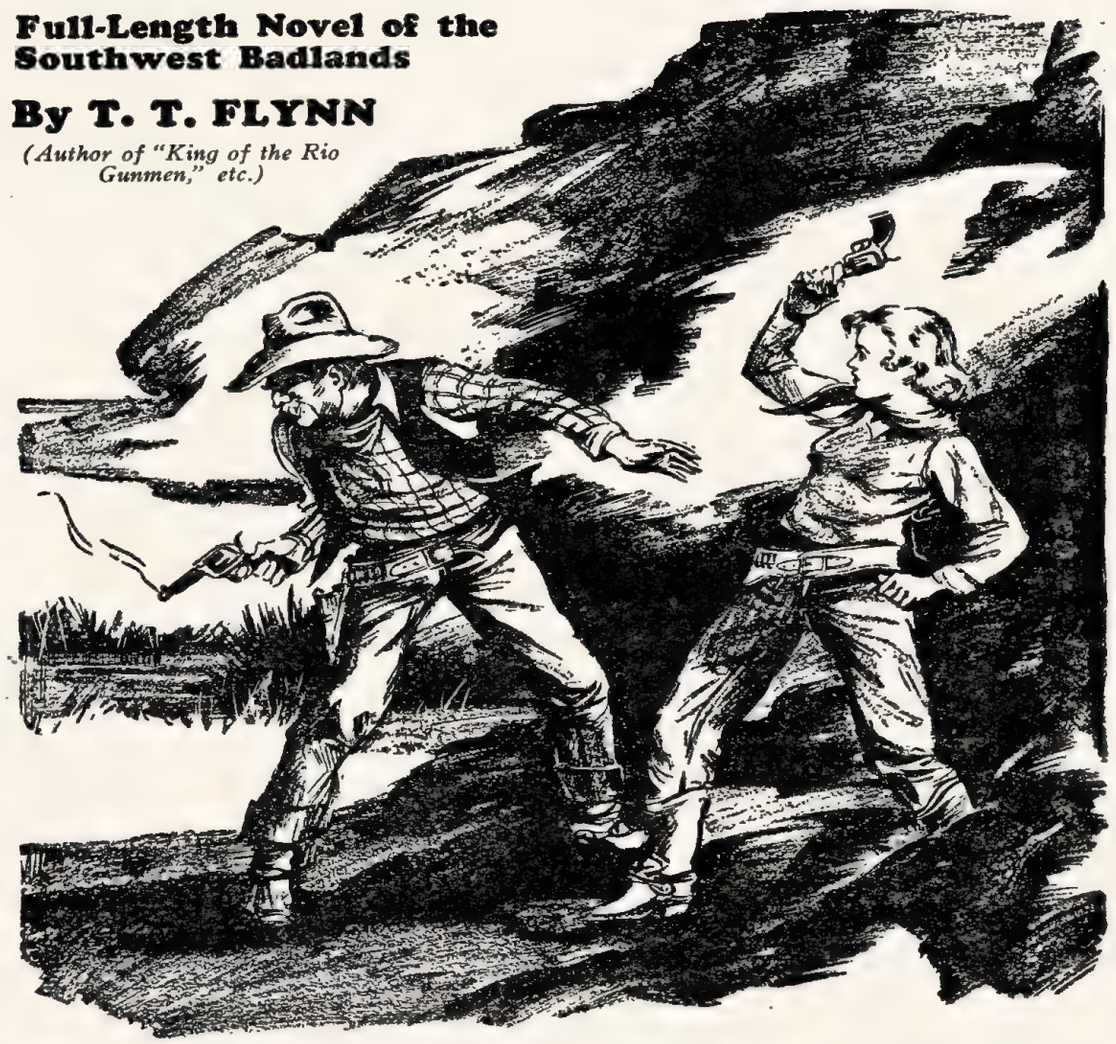
Ran stubbornly followed decisions that

OUTLAWED BY THE OWLHOOT!

Full-Length Novel of the Southwest Badlands

By T. T. FLYNN

(Author of "King of the Rio Gunmen," etc.)



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Ran stubbornly followed decisions that way. He was only twenty-six now, but the habit had become ingrained. The same characteristic had kept him on the trail of Black Pardee when other men had lost Pardee's tracks and had turned back. Ran had had a hunch that Pardee would come this way. He had circled for miles until he had again cut those tracks with the off hind hoof smaller than the others.

Now Ran sat motionless in the saddle watching the small adobe hut ahead there in the moonlight. Light did not show again; no signs of life were visible.

A full ten minutes Ran waited patiently. Then, certain that he had not been observed, he dismounted. That, too, was characteristic. Wiry and straight as a stalk of *ocatillo* cactus, Ran had a certain stolid patience; the patience of a high-strung man who practiced iron self-control.

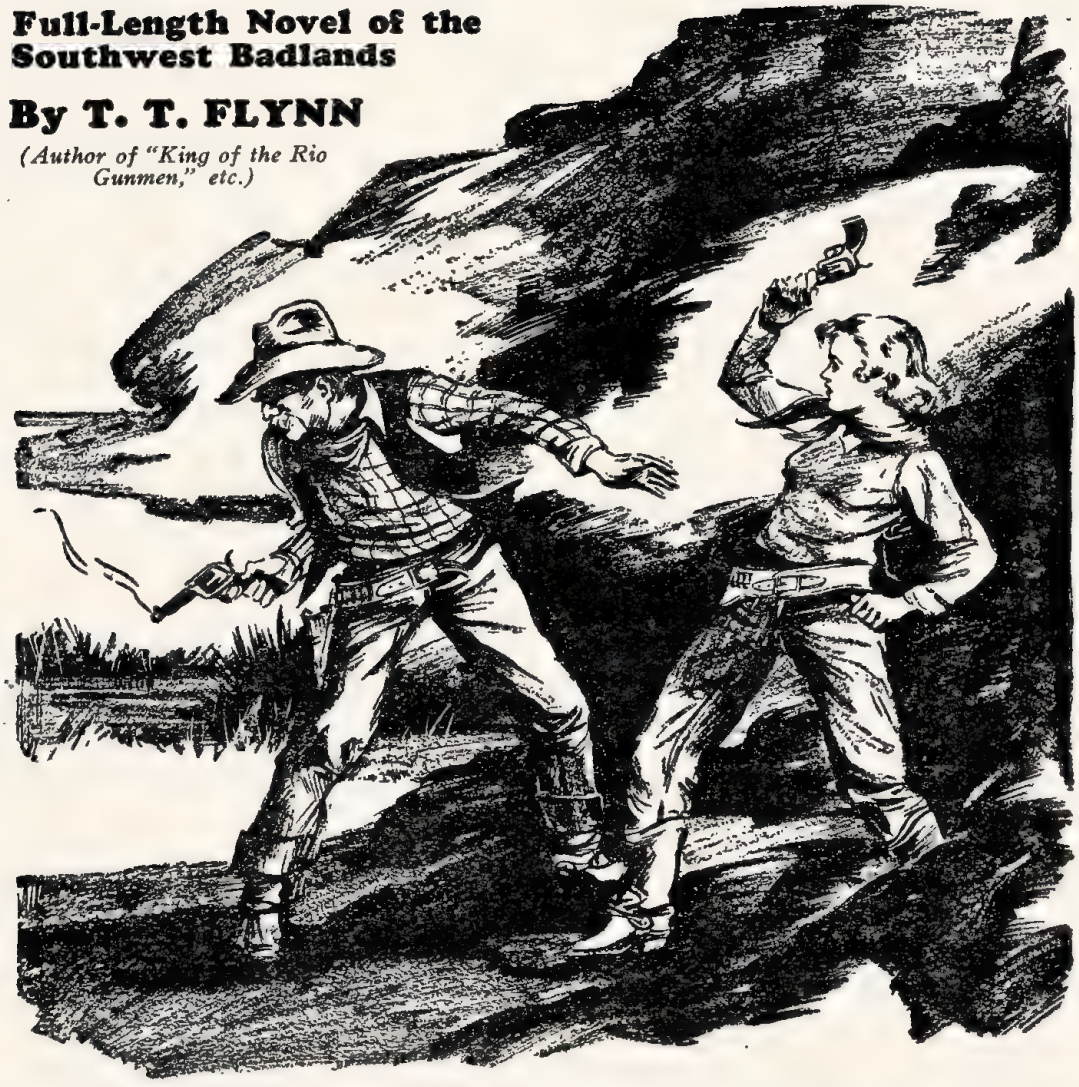
Ran dismounted, knowing what had to be done. For miles back the silver moonlight had marked the ever-increasing limp of Pardee's horse. The left foreleg was badly lamed, and getting worse. Half a mile back Pardee's bootmarks had appeared in the dry sandy soil where he had been forced finally to walk and lead the horse.

That small adobe hut was as far as

Full-Length Novel of the Southwest Badlands

By T. T. FLYNN

(Author of "King of the Rio Gunmen," etc.)



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Pardee could have gone. The Mexican owner had been dead these several years. The country through here was deserted. A man afoot would never find another horse near here; he would be lucky to keep life in his parched, drying body.

For when the witchery of the moonlight passed and the first beauty of the morning sun changed to the blistering fury of mid-day heat, this Por Nada country showed its fangs.

Bare hills, desert valleys, open flats where the yellow sand drifted in uneasy ripples—that was the Por Nada country. Cactus and greasewood, lizards and gaunt gray coyotes slipping through the cold, false dawn—that was the Por Nada country. Heat, loneliness and plain hell—*that* was Por Nada.

When a man's horse went lame and he was afoot at an adobe hut and a brackish well, there he stopped for an hour, a day, a week—perhaps forever. Few people rode this way; life stopped easily.

SO RAN MALONE knew what to expect. He led his black horse back a hundred yards where an out-cropping of rocks gave cover. On a normal night the black was almost invisible; but in this flood of moonlight anything that moved was stark and clear.

Ran hobbled the black and dropped the reins; then stooping, walking carefully, he advanced, taking cover whenever shadows permitted.

The coyotes were yapping again far off beyond the low, harsh hills which raised a jagged rampart across the horizon several miles to the south. Otherwise the night was silent.

The adobe hut was quiet. Light did not show again. Gravel grated softly under Ran's high-heeled boots as he turned to the right along the slope, blending in with the ground as much as possible. He was circling wide to come at the hut from another direction.

His foot loosened a small stone; it dislodged others; and the brief clitter-clatter grated loudly on the night.

Ran crouched motionless for a few moments. When no sign of life appeared at the hut he went on; and as he picked his way carefully he wondered what Pardee was doing. Resting? Sleeping? Or peering watchfully through that single front window?

The last seemed likely. Pardee, with a price on his head for years, was as cautious and tricky as a cruising coyote; and as cold-blooded and dangerous as a coiled rattler beside a path.

There was little cover on the slope which went down to meet the flat.

Ran knew each step he took increased the danger. A watchful eye could easily see his slow circling advance. Pardee might be watching now; Pardee's rifle might be sighted; Pardee's trigger finger might be tensing for the first careful shot.

There was a cold, grim ruthlessness about Ran Malone's advance across the flat ground where the moonlight glinted on white alkali crystals. Inside Ran felt the same way, calm and certain that this had to be done.

Waiting would not help. The moon would last until the sun came up; the day would be long and hot, and the low well curbing behind the hut held life for the man who controlled it throughout the blistering day.

This end of the hut had no window. When Ran reached the point where vision from the front was cut off, he straightened, breathed a bit easier, and advanced faster on his toes toward the back of the hut.

He came to the back door like a shadow drifting under the moon, put an ear to the boards and listened. Not a sound was audible inside.

Ran was standing there with his wide, bat-wing chaps casting a grotesque shadow on the ground when a curt order sounded behind him.

"Don't move or I'll kill you!"

At the first sound Ran spun with uncanny speed. The speaker had been hiding behind the well curbing. Ran's rifle was snapping up to shoot before the voice itself registered. He was barely able to slip his finger off the trigger; and at the same moment the figure standing beside the low well curbing fired at him.

The bullet struck the top of Ran's head. He felt the dull shock of the terrific blow an instant after he realized it was a woman who had spoken; a woman who stood there in the moonlight beside the well curbing.

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl in the Desert

WHEN Ran Malone recovered consciousness the moon was still there high overhead. The house was at the right, and the well curbing at his left. His head hurt terrifically.

He moved his head. A cold clear voice addressed him.

"Can you understand me?"

Ran twisted his head toward the sound. The girl was standing a foot or so behind him, dressed in a divided riding skirt, a sombrero, a short jacket. And the moonlight glinted on the barrel of her rifle.

Ran's face and neck were wet. She must have drawn water and slopped it over him. But his mouth was dry and parched. When he tried to sit up he found that his ankles were bound and his wrists and elbows were lashed behind his back.

Her cold voice addressed him again. "So you will not be in doubt, understand that I will kill you instantly if you try to get free. Is that clear?"

"It oughta be," Ran replied thickly. "Do I rate a drink of water, ma'am?"

"You don't!" she said unfeelingly. "But I'll give it to you. I want to keep you alive until you hang."

Water sloshed. Her arm lifted his head. She pushed the jagged, rusty edge of a tin can against his lips. Ran drank the brackish water gratefully.

She dropped his head abruptly. The jar sent waves of pain through him. Ran winced, trying to get the straight of things.

It still seemed unreasonable that Black Pardee was not standing there. Pardee should be present. He could not have gone far with his horse limping so badly. And Pardee could not have brought this woman here either.

For she was a girl, slender and vigorous. When she had bent over him with the water, the moonlight had shown the smooth oval of her face. Now in the shadow cast by her sombrero brim, she looked young and pretty.

Too young, too pretty for this fantastic encounter in the Por Nada country. A woman in Pardee's place was not reasonable. A woman who shot to kill as she had shot was still more unreasonable. Her cold, threatening manner raised the thing to absurdity.

"How bad is my head?" Ran asked her.

"You'll live," she answered unfeelingly. "Where are the horses?"

"Horses?"

"Exactly."

"What horses?"

"Lying won't help you!" she warned hotly.

Slow, smoldering anger drove Ran up to a sitting position. "I ain't clear as to what you're talkin' about!" he snapped. "But for a lady, you're actin' damned funny! What's on your mind?"

"I suppose you just came back to visit," she retorted witheringly.

"I didn't come back. I'd just got here."

"The man you shot in the back died half an hour later. He's in the house there." Her voice quivered for a moment. "I think the good God sent you back here to me," she said thankfully. "I think He let me see you sneaking through the moonlight."

AND then Ran began to see how it was. Knowing Black Pardee he could understand it.

"I reckon," he said slowly, "a man walked in here sometime this evening leadin' a lame horse. He shot the man who was with you an' rode off with your horses."

Her reply lashed out with bitterness. "You remember it all very well, don't you?"

"I'm guessin'," Ran said patiently. "I've been followin' that hombre. He's a bad one."

"Of course I don't believe you," she said. "I had gone for a walk, but after the two shots, when you rode away with all three of the horses, I was close enough to get an idea of your build, and see your chaps."

"I guess there ain't any use arguin' with you about it," Ran said slowly.

"Not the slightest. But if you want to live for a little longer, tell me where those horses are. I don't intend to wander around all night looking for them."

"There's only one horse," Ran said. "Mine. Would you believe me if you saw him?"

"Your horse doesn't interest me. I saw that he was black."

Ran swore silently to himself. So Pardee had been riding a black horse also. And wearing bat-wing chaps too. The thing was getting more mixed-up at every point.

"You're all tangled," Ran insisted. "The man you're talkin' about led a lame horse in here. It might have been black; I didn't see it. But it wasn't the black horse I rode in here."

"I think," she told him coldly, "you've said enough. Where is this horse?"

"If you find it, what do you aim to do?"

"Locate the other two horses and take you on with me."

"There aren't any more horses," Ran said flatly. "So stop arguin'."

"If I were a man, I'd make you talk!" she cried angrily. "When I think of Johnny Black lying in there with two bullets in his back, I want to do the same to you!"

Before that picture Ran's anger melted away. For the first time he began to realize what this girl had been up against. Crossing the Por Nada was bad enough. But to come back from a walk and find her companion dying, and the killer vanishing with the horses was little short of tragedy.

She had gone through hell while the wounded man was dying. Afterwards, being here alone, on foot, with a dead man for company, was more than any girl should ever be called on to face.

And to top it all, to have a skulking shadow slip toward her through the moonlight. . . .

Small wonder, Ran thought, that a touch of hysteria was in her voice. He spoke to her gently.

"You're makin' a mistake, ma'am—but we won't argue about it now. My horse is back there in the notch through the ridge. He's gentle. Get on him an' look around if you think I've got any more hid out."

"Leave you here alone?" she said skeptically. "Stand up. I'll release your legs."

She had tied him with rawhide thongs

which she had evidently soaked in water. Now they were drying, tightening. Ran's hands were already beginning to feel numb.

But he got no relief there. With the jagged edge of a tin can, she cut the rawhide around his ankles and helped him up. Standing there with his wrists and elbows lashed behind his back, Ran saw that her head barely came to his shoulder. She was so small and slight to be doing this; but there was no lack of determination in her voice as she ordered him to walk to his horse.

And she followed close behind carrying her rifle.

The black horse was standing patiently by the outcropping rocks. With only a brief word the girl brought them both back to the well. Ordering Ran to stand off a few feet, she drew water herself for the horse.

"Will he carry bareback without bucking?" she asked.

"I reckon so."

By now Ran was interested. He watched her remove the saddle; understood what was in her mind when she led the black to the well curbing.

"Get on!" she ordered coldly.

She held the horse, and steadied Ran with a hand while he awkwardly mounted the well curb and slid onto the horse. Deftly she got on behind him. She left her rifle against the well curb, but she wore a heavy cartridge belt and six-gun.

And so, armed, while Ran's hands were still lashed behind him, she reached around him for the reins. As they rode off, she cast one look back at the lonely adobe hut.

THERE were times during that ride when Ran was certain hell could be no worse. His cramped shoulders and arms were strained by each movement. Pain was followed by agony, and finally numbness.

The ride was silent for the most part. Their bodies were close, but a barrier separated them. The girl made no more threats; but Ran knew with certainty that she was ready to shoot him if necessary.

He wondered who she was; where she was going. He asked her and she made no answer.

The moon kept pace with them, white, cold, calm. The coyotes yapped and howled with lonely eeriness. Even the moonlight could not soften the harshness of the country.

Gray false-dawn gave way to dawn; the rose and gold hues of a gorgeous sunrise hung a mantle of beauty briefly over the desert; and then the sun pushed up in a cloudless sky, and the Por Nada lay about them in all its savage calm.

By mid-morning the heat lay close in shimmering fury. The black horse plodded patiently; but already it had done more than its share of travelling without rest, feed, water. Ran Malone sat on the bare, sweat-streaked back in a stupor of discomfort and pain.

"Lady," he finally said thickly, "how long do you aim to keep this up?"

"Does it matter?" she replied indifferently. "You'll hang anyway."

She spoke with an effort, as if his words had aroused her also from near-stupor. Ran twisted, turning his head until he could see her face. Pale, wan, drawn with weariness, her small face was grimy with desert dust; but it was undaunted, stubbornly carrying on.

"You can't stick it much longer," Ran warned her. "It won't be long 'til I'll have to figure how to get you outa this."

She chuckled ironically; she could still do that.

"I'll ride as long as you do," she told him. "And when I give out, I'll make sure you don't have a chance to give orders. It's about five miles to Yaqui Pool in that lava ahead."

"Never heard of it."

"The maps don't show it. The Indians kept it a secret for a long time."

"You seem to know this country about as well as the Indians."

"I have Indian friends," she said calmly.

"Who are you?" Ran asked bluntly again.

And this time she said, "My name is Anne Kilpatrick."

The name meant nothing to him. They rode in silence again; and presently were threading a tortuous way through bare, lava ridges that had been tumbled and piled in a great dyke by some ancient cataclysm. And when it seemed to Ran that another mile would finish them both, the narrow cleft through which they were riding opened off to the right in a second gash.

Full fifty feet high the sides of that gash rose straight up. The bottom was lava sand, cut by the marks of many hoofs. Anne Kilpatrick turned into it. A hundred yards and the gash turned left sharply, ending in a bleak lava wall which overhung the shaded sand below, and a small pool of water.

A dusty horse stood by the water. A man lay in the sand sleeping. The black horse whinnied; and the sleeping man came awake and bounced to his feet, flipping out a gun.

"Looks like you've cut yourself off a hunk of trouble," Ran said thickly. "Now let's see you chew it."

Anne Kilpatrick said nothing as she steadied the black's rush toward the water.

CHAPTER THREE

Hangtree Road

RAN stared at the stranger narrowly as they rode up. What he saw was not reassuring. Stocky, powerful, with the bowed legs of a man who had spent most of his life in a saddle, the man was something of a dandy. He wore tight-fitting, soft-leather chaps, studded with polished silver conchos, and his leather jacket had silver conchos for buttons. His sombrero was high-crowned, in the style of the country south of the Border, and a braided band of silver wire ran around the base of the crown.

The horse was a magnificent gray animal, bearing a fine, silver-trimmed saddle. But Ran's glance fastened on the dark, suspicious face which watched them. The stranger wore two gun belts. A repeating rifle leaned against the rock wall within arm's reach.

This was no rancher, no cowman passing peaceably through the Por Nada. The signs were there for a knowing man to read. No kindness, gentleness or mercy showed in the harsh lines of the bold face. But Ran did his best.

"Hi-yah!" he called.

The man looked startled, suspicious at what he saw. Then a slow, broadening grin came over his face. The wary tenseness went out of his manner.

"I'll be damned if I didn't think I was seein' things! Lady, where'd you get this buzzard yo're packin' around so careful?"

"That doesn't matter, does it?" Anne Kilpatrick replied coolly. "Help him down. We both need water badly."

She was sawing on the bit to keep the horse from plunging into the water. The man thrust out a stubby, powerful hand and forced the frantic animal back.

" 'Light an' make yoreself comfortable, miss," he said with exaggerated polite-

ness. "It ain't often a pretty girl like you shows up in country like this."

She slipped stiffly to the ground, stood back while Ran slid off. He staggered. She steadied him. Her grip was unexpectedly firm and strong.

"Water the horse first, please," she told the man; and Ran forgave her a lot when she said that.

Grinning, the stranger let the horse drink.

"That's enough," Ran told him a moment later.

That got him a quick glance of annoyance.

"For a man who's tied up like a turkey cock headin' for market, yuh've got a heap tuh say," the stranger grunted. He pulled the horse from the water and stood with a sardonic smile while they drank.

Ran felt better as he stood up and faced the man's estimating stare. Still grinning sardonically, the other spoke to Anne Kilpatrick.

"Where'd yuh get this *hombre?* Where yuh takin' him?"

"He shot a man in the back. I'm taking him to the law."

"Yuh don't say?" the man's eyebrows lifted in exaggerated surprise. "Plugged a man in the back, huh? He must be a bad one. But yo're shore takin' a heap of trouble tuh get rid of him, miss. Whyn't yuh shoot him an' save the trouble?"

"He'll have a fair trial."

"That's just yore pretty little soft heart workin'," the stranger said, grinning. "Now, me, I ain't that way. Suppose I put a bullet in him, plant him in the sand, an' that'll be the end of it?"

"Thanks. I'll handle him my way."

Ran's face set in bleak lines. "We're gettin' along, stranger. Let the lady mind her own business."

For an answer he got a full-handed blow to the jaw that knocked him sprawling. A kick followed.

"Yo're talkin' too much," the stranger told him, thumbing back the hammer of his gun.

Ran struggled to his knees. He saw Anne Kilpatrick holding her revolver, noticed how small was her hand. Without much hope he heard her sharp warning.

"Get away from him!"

The man looked at her with a scowl, and then laughed shortly. "Put that gun up before yuh hurt yoreself!" he ordered.

"You heard me!"

"I'd shore hate tuh hurt such a pretty little thing. Gimme that gun." He stepped toward her, putting out his hand.

Anne Kilpatrick backed away. He followed. Her back came against the dark lava rock, and she was cornered.

RAN was on his feet again by then. He made a lumbering rush. The man turned toward him, uttering an oath. And Anne Kilpatrick swung her big revolver. The stranger dropped where he stood.

A moment later Ran was standing over the unconscious man, saying gruffly: "This ain't no way to act now. You oughta be proud."

For Anne Kilpatrick was standing there trembling. "I thought I'd have to kill him," she said unsteadily.

"Good riddance if you had."

"But I—I've never killed anyone. I don't want to!"

Ran had to laugh. "For a girl who mighty near blew the top of my head off, an' has been raising conniption fits all over the Por Nada, you're showin' a mighty tender side. Buck up an' get this jasper's guns off him before he comes to."

Ran stood there with little quizzical lines at the corners of his eyes while she

disarmed the unconscious figure. She was steady again when she finished.

"Maybe it was a good thing," she said with an attempt at perkiness. "We need his horse. I'll send men back for him."

"It's a good idea," Ran nodded. "But a better idea'll be to loosen this rawhide around my arms. Gangrene'll be settin' in. Maybe it's too late already. If I am goin' to hang, it'll look better if I jump off with both arms."

She searched his face, nodded, and with the stranger's hunting knife slashed the hard, dry rawhide thongs.

For minutes Ran's arms remained useless. Then he groaned as circulation crept back. The rising pain was exquisite torture.

Anne Kilpatrick stood to one side with her gun cocked. When Ran began to swing his arms and finally to rub them vigorously, she said: "Can you ride now?"

"Plenty. Can you?" Ran grinned.

"I'll follow you on his horse. And—I'll shoot if I have to."

Ran looked at her quizzically. "I believe you," he agreed. "It'll hurt you more'n it does me—but you'll shoot. All right; I'll remember that."

They were on the horses, ready to leave, when the stranger sat up groggily. He felt the side of his head; then saw them and scrambled to his feet, reaching for a gun. But Anne Kilpatrick had all his weapons.

"Don't forget there's a lady present, an' I ain't tied up now," Ran warned him.

The man stood there, legs braced in the sand, glaring at them. "Yuh aim tuh leave me here on foot?" he asked harshly.

"You're already left," Ran said indifferently. "I'd leave you on your belly to crawl if I had the say. But the lady's soft-hearted; she's gonna send men back for you. I'd advise you to fill up on water an' start walkin'. She's a grizzly, an' her men'll have claws."

"How's a man tuh walk outa this God-forsaken hole?" the stranger yelled furiously.

"You figger it out," Ran grinned. "*Adios, amigo.* I got to get along an' get hung." Ran lifted a hand in a parting salute as he swung his horse around and started off.

Troubled, Anne Kilpatrick spoke when they were out of sight. "I don't like to leave him there like that. After all—"

"After all," said Ran, "he brought it on hisself. You're too soft-hearted at the wrong times."

"You're a queer man," she said thoughtfully, behind him. "You tried to help me back there."

"I don't pick on women—or shoot men in the back."

She said nothing to that. In a little while they were out of the lava, again riding through the pitiless blast of the sun. But the water, the brief rest, the extra horse, made a world of difference. They traveled faster, easier.

But at that the heat would have dropped any ordinary woman; the country would have daunted many men. South they bore toward low mountains that looked as barren and harsh as this lower country. Late in the afternoon they struck a pair of wagon ruts; and followed those ruts into the low mountains as the sun went down. Winding, twisting, travelling steeply upward, they kept on.

THIRST gripped Ran again; hunger gnawed. And if he felt that way, how did Anne Kilpatrick feel? The bare rocks about them offered no relief. But when they finally gained the crest and started down the other slope, the moon showed signs of greater rainfall. Stunted trees reared grotesque shapes on the

rocky slopes, cactus grew more plentiful, scanty grass began to appear.

They rode down a narrow, winding canyon; and presently a trickle of water appeared beside the trail and grew more plentiful as they advanced. They stopped, drank, and rode on in the silence of sodden weariness.

A dozen times Ran could have escaped. He did not. It was too much like taking advantage of an exhausted child. He was beginning to wonder if, left alone, she could go on. Finally he spoke over his shoulder.

"You're killin' yourself. How much more of this do you aim to try?"

"Keep on," she ordered wearily.

Not long after that the canyon widened out; the moonlight showed a greener, fairer country rolling gently ahead to the faint twinkling of lights.

They followed the shallow little stream for another hour—and suddenly they were there, riding up to cottonwoods, corrals, a windmill and buildings of a ranch.

Dogs met them, barking, and quieted when Anne Kilpatrick spoke. Men came out of the house and waited for them.

"The dogs act like you belong here," Ran commented.

"This is the YK ranch. My two brothers and I own it," the girl answered shortly.

And there was no more time for speech as they rode to the house and Anne Kilpatrick called:

"Bill, I've got a prisoner. He killed Johnny Black and I brought him in."

Other men appeared around the end of the house, hurrying toward them. Ran slipped from the bare back of his horse, saying calmly:

"Never mind the guns, men. All I want is some sleep right now."

A voice answered with harsh amusement. "Yuh'll both get a place tuh sleep. I never thought we'd have a lady with us tonight. Grab 'em, boys!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Black Pardee's Prisoners

A GUN was already in Ran's side. It would have been futile to resist. Four men were around him already, all with guns out.

He stood still while Anne Kilpatrick struggled briefly, was overpowered, disarmed. Then he spoke coolly.

"Pardee, ain't that you?"

"What's that? Who'n hell are yuh?"

"Ran Malone!"

Pardee stepped over and peered at Ran's face. He was a good three inches taller, broader, thicker; and now the situation struck him as a huge joke.

"If I didn't see it, I wouldn't believe it!" he chortled. "Ran Malone herded in here like a cactus-fed maverick! Boys, here's a *hombre* every sheriff in the Nueces river country is boogery over; an' damned if a woman ain't made him chew bait an' come a-crawlin'!"

They laughed. "What's wrong with them Nueces lawmen? Ain't they as good as a woman?" one man asked.

"Nothin' the matter with the sheriffs," Pardee retorted jocularly. "Malone musta tamed down a heap."

Anne Kilpatrick said, "So he *is* an outlaw!"

"Lady," said Black Pardee, turning toward her, "he ain't no preacher's boy. Where'd you get him?"

"He shot a man who was with me, and took our horses."

"Yuh don't say?" said Pardee, with a new note of interest in his voice. "Where'd all this happen?"

"Out in the Por Nada. And will you please tell me," said Anne Kilpatrick with a challenge that was almost pathetic now,

"what you men are doing here? Where is my brother?"

"They're all takin' things easy for awhile. We're sorta taken charge of the ranch, yuh might say, ma'am," Pardee said with mock politeness.

"My brother—did you—is he hurt?"

"If yuh mean that lanky son-of-a-gun that calls himself Bill Kilpatrick, he's cussin' strong when he can use his mouth, ma'am. Only his left arm is shot up a little. Bring 'em in the house, boys."

Seven men, including Pardee, gathered about them in the big, lamplighted living room. They were hard cases. Pardee looked as big, as hard, as dangerous and ruthless as ever.

The man was all bone and muscle inside his bat-wing chaps, his riding boots, his shirt opened over a thick neck. He wore a calf-skin jacket and a single gun. Somewhere about him would be the deadly little forty-one caliber derringer he always carried.

But you never really knew Pardee by looking at his black mustache, his narrow, thin-lipped mouth, his sharply ridged nose. The slightly slanting eyes under bushy black brows, the dark-skinned saturnine cast of the face topped off with coal-black hair inclined to be curly, did not give the reason why the man was called Black Pardee.

But when you saw once the savage black temper of the man, you knew. Pardee's fits of murderous fury made him worse than the common run of killers. But now Pardee was almost genial as he looked at Anne Kilpatrick and showed white teeth in a smile of appreciation.

"Ain't she a sight for sore eyes, boys?"

They agreed. A short, bandy-legged man with a hooked nose, said solemnly: "She's the purtiest ever I seen!

Anne Kilpatrick looked too weary to have any emotion. "I want to see my brother," she said to Pardee.

"Shore, ma'am. I'll take yuh myself."

She went with him calmly, unafraid outwardly; but Ran looked after them, scowling. He had heard stories about Pardee and women.

THE minutes before Pardee returned dragged. No mock politeness was in his manner now. He was grim as he opened a sack of tobacco and started to build a smoke.

"Well, Malone," he said, staring over the cigarette. "It's shore a hell of a surprise tuh see you here. How-come?"

Ran shrugged. "Things got a little warm on the Nueces."

Pardee moistened the paper, shaped the cigarette, reached in his vest for a match. "Never got too warm for yuh before," he said, flicking the match alight with a thumb nail.

"Any reason why I shouldn't travel?" Ran asked calmly.

"Nope," said Pardee, dribbling smoke through his nose. "But there ain't any good reason why yuh should light around here. Funny yuh bein' in the Por Nada just now. The girl says yuh plugged the fellow she was ridin' with. He was the foreman here. That don't sound like yuh, Malone. Yuh always put up a smooth front." Pardee sneered slightly.

"My front ain't changed," Ran said calmly. "I didn't shoot the fellow. I rode into the Por Nada after a ranny who held up a stage. When I seen a light in a house I figgered it was him an' I eased up close to make sure. She was hidin' out behind the well. She creased me, an' had me tied when I came out of it."

Ran showed the blood-caked wound on his head.

Pardee stared in frowning concentration. He was no fool.

"Why was yuh after the man who held up the stage?" Pardee demanded. "You packin' a badge now?"

"I came along just as the posse was startin' out. So I rode along. Me bein' a stranger on a strange range, I figgered he might be someone I could do business with. I was driftin' on west anyway."

"So yuh had tuh sneak up on him, huh?"

"Him expectin' a posse, it seemed to be a good idea to get the drop first an' talk afterwards," Ran grinned. "Only the girl got the drop on me. She swore I'd killed her partner, an' hazed me on here."

But Pardee still was not satisfied. "If she was afoot out there in the Por Nada, where'd that extra horse come from?"

"I had an extra horse," Ran said calmly.

Aud suddenly Pardee was not suspicious.

"Yuh played in luck, Malone. If we hadn't been here, they'd shore have hung yuh. Likely the fellow yuh was trailin' is outa these parts by now."

"Likely," Ran agreed with a straight face. "How long are you gonna keep me standin' here with a gun in my back? I'm thinkin' we can do business. You ain't squattin' on this ranch for fun."

"Correct," said Pardee. "We can use a man as handy with a gun as you are, Malone. You want to throw in with us?"

"What's the play?"

"No hurry. You'll get told later."

"All I want right now is grub an' a place to sleep."

"Cheyenne, take him in the kitchen an' let him sleep in the storeroom," Pardee said promptly.

Cheyenne was the heavy-set man who had been holding a gun in Ran's back. Now he led the way back along a hall into the kitchen. Beans, meat and a stack of *tortillas* were on a table.

Ran had just filled a tin plate when Pardee came in and filled a second one.

"Got to feed beauty," he said grinning, as he went out.

Cheyenne watched Ran attack the food. "My God!" he exclaimed. "No man could be that hungry!"

"You're findin' out," Ran grinned. "How about gettin' me a belt an' gun?"

"Pardee'll have tuh do that. You won't need a gun tonight."

"Guess not. What's on Pardee's mind?"

"He'll have tuh tell yuh that too."

Ran asked no more questions. When the plate was empty he sighed with satisfaction, rolled a cigarette, asked for his bed.

Cheyenne unlocked a door at the end of the kitchen, revealing a small, dark room.

"The Mex cook's in there," he stated. "Kick him outa his blanket an' make yoreself comfortable."

The storeroom was filled with barrels, sacks, boxes. The walls were lined with shelves. Two windows, high up, were too small for a man to get through. On the floor lay a snoring figure rolled in a blanket.

Cheyenne closed the door. A key turned in the lock. Ran smiled wryly to himself in the blackness. They weren't taking any chances on his leaving in the night. Ignoring the Mexican cook, he lay down on the floor. In two minutes he was sound asleep.

A HAND on his shoulder awoke Ran in the morning. "Time tuh roll out," Cheyenne said.

The kitchen was fragrant with breakfast. Two frightened looking Mexican women were helping the morose cook. An armed guard sat in a chair. Ran went out to the pump, stripped to the waist and washed.

He felt better as he pulled on his shirt and looked around. People had ranched here a long time, he decided. Men had planted those great cottonwoods long

years back. The valley looked fresh and smiling in contrast to the harsh Por Nada. In all directions were low hills. Faintly visible, off in the south through the misty blue distance were the peaks of higher mountains.

Those peaks must be in old Mexico. Ran was thoughtful as he turned back into the house. He noticed Cheyenne leaning in the open doorway, watching him. Pardee must still be suspicious.

Breakfast was eaten in the dining room off the opposite end of the kitchen. The bright sun sifted through gay curtains. Anne Kilpatrick's touch was visible everywhere.

Pardee was surly; he wolfed the food an uneasy Mexican woman set before him and said little until he finished and rolled a cigarette. Then he turned to Ran.

"I reckon we can use yuh, Malone—even if that girl did bring yuh in like a whipped pup. There's plenty of fight ahead—an' plenty of money afterwards."

"Right now," said Ran, "I'd rather have a gun. I don't feel dressed without one."

"You'll get a gun."

"Uh-huh. Where's all this money you aim to get?"

"The Kilpatricks," Pardee said curtly, "own a mine a couple of hundred miles south of the Border. The oldest brother runs it. Hell is popping from Mexico City to Nogales these days. Old General José Lazaro is on the prod in the north. He's raided the mine a couple of times—but he didn't get it all; not by a damned sight."

Pardee drained his coffee cup and set it down hard in the thick saucer.

"Lazaro had sense enough not tuh stop the mine. It's a fat goose that'll lay an egg whenever he needs it. But they haven't been able tuh ship out any metal. It's been pilin' up there, hid away. But Lazaro can get it whenever he makes up his mind. He's got ways of makin' folks talk."

Pardee grinned at the thought. Leaning his elbows on the table, he inhaled deeply and continued with smoke dribbling from his mouth.

"Kilpatrick decided tuh try slipping his gold across the Border secretly. He sent out a shipment in a wagon an' got it through. He's ready tuh make a big play an' get everything out he can. It's comin' here tuh the ranch. He'll have every gun he can trust along tuh guard it, and'll have charge of it hisself. We'll get it here," said Pardee, grinning.

"How'd you find out all this?" Ran asked carefully.

" 'Lonzo Jones, there acrost from you, worked at the mine as a guard. He seen the first shipment go out an' heard 'em plannin' for the big one. 'Lonzo figgered he'd never get rich packin' a gun there at the mine. He quit and hightailed it tuh Globe, where I was. 'Lonzo an' me has done business before. I had some of the boys with me an' I knew where tuh get word tuh the rest. We scattered an' headed this way tuh take the ranch. All we got tuh do is sit tight here. Last night just before yuh got here a Mex rode in tuh say Harry Kilpatrick'd be in tomorrow or next day from the mine. Are yuh ready to make the fight with us?"

Pardee had planned well. He always did; and in spite of himself Ran's pulse beat faster at the thought of the stakes. Bar gold! Loot from a rich mine! Any man's gold who could take it and hold it! Men on the outlaw trail dreamed about such a chance, and seldom got it.

The score with Pardee could be put off for a time. Those outlaw years back in the Nueces country had hardened Ran. Many things he would not do—but man against man, gun against gun, keen wits on both sides, made a fair gamble.

"I'll side with the rest of you," Ran told Pardee.

DURING the morning two Mexican cowhands rode in unsuspectingly. They were disarmed and locked up with the rest of the hands in the adobe bunkhouse. Two men had been killed when the ranch had been taken over; eight now were locked in the bunkhouse. Two of Pardee's men stood constant guard outside.

The horses were in the corrals, eating well, resting. No roads ran near the ranch. Travellers seldom came this way. The layout was perfect.

Anne Kilpatrick and her brother came out for exercise, guarded by two armed men. Ran was leaning against the back of the house, smoking a cigarette, when they came by. She had been on his mind in a vague, disquieting way. Now Ran straightened, searching her face.

Much of her weariness had vanished. She had washed, donned clean clothes, fixed her hair. But no girl could go through the ordeal she had stood and not bear signs of it.

Anne Kilpatrick's face was still wan; purple shadows lay under her eyes. They made her look prettier, Ran thought. Chin up, still stubborn, proud, showing no traces of fear, she looked smaller than ever this morning. She stopped before him, coldly antagonistic.

"So you *are* one of them after all? Everything you said was a lie."

The young man beside her had a bloody bandage about one arm. He was a shade taller than Ran, perhaps a year or so older; his tanned, face bore a certain likeness to Anne Kilpatrick. In common they had that stubborn, unbeaten air.

Cold gray eyes met Ran's look. "So this is the one who shot Johnny Black in the back?" Bill said to his sister.

The two guards stood behind them, grinning at the diversion. Ran ignored them and eyed the Kilpatricks, brother and sister.

"I happened to be tellin' the truth," he said calmly. "I never saw this Johnny Black. Wouldn't have shot him in the back if I had. I don't handle my guns that way."

"No?" said Anne Kilpatrick with her little chin up. "We know why you men are here." Color rushed into her cheeks; her voice grew stormy. "If anything happens to my brother Harry, I'll do my best to see that the last one of you—"

"Stop it, Anne!" her brother broke in curtly. "You're wasting breath. Mister," he said to Ran, "Johnny Black was an old friend of mine. I won't forget the man who shot him in the back."

One of the guards chuckled, broke in. "If Pardee has his way, mebbe yuh won't remember it long either. Me now, I don't see why he don't shoot the lot of yuh an' get it over with."

Grinning, the other one said: "I reckon Pardee's got a soft spot in his heart fer a purty face. Business before pleasure—but I ain't never heard of him passin' up any pleasure."

"Come on, Anne," Bill Kilpatrick said stonily.

The girl's face was pale as she went on with him. But it seemed to Ran that her eyes were unseeing as they stared ahead. Or perhaps they *were* seeing; picturing visions that made the ride across the Por Nada seem a pleasure trip.

THAT blindly staring look stayed with Ran. He told himself irritably nothing was wrong with her—yet. And her business was none of his business. Only the gold—and Black Pardee were his business.

That night Ran slept on the living room floor with three of the other men. Morning brought a growing air of ex-

pectancy. Today, if everything went well, the gold from the Kilpatrick mine would be in. Pardee was almost jovial. Extra ammunition was brought out. Guns were inspected, cleaned, tried out.

Pardee himself gave Ran two cartridge belts, two revolvers, a Winchester rifle and a hunting knife.

"Better get used tuh yore guns," he said significantly. "Yuh'll need 'em plenty when the time comes."

Fresh blood was caked on one of the cartridge belts. "I hope his luck ain't comin' to me with this," Ran said, smiling faintly as he indicated the blood.

"Yo're makin' yore own luck now," Pardee told him bluntly.

By now Ran knew that Anne Kilpatrick and her brother were locked in one of the bedrooms. For some reason Pardee was showing them extra consideration; although the man who guarded the front of the house looked in the window every time he passed, and there was always some one inside the house near their door.

The sun was hot. The man on guard went inside now and then for water. Ran came to the window at a time when the guard was inside. Rolling a cigarette, he stopped and spoke without looking inside.

"Miss Kilpatrick."

She was there a moment later, regarding him distrustfully. The purple shadows were deeper under her eyes. She looked as if she had not slept much during the night.

"I just wanted to tell you not to worry about what might happen to you," Ran told her.

"I don't understand."

"Don't try; but don't worry about Pardee."

Bitterly she said: "Are you offering to protect me?"

"If you need it," Ran said shortly.

"Does that include my brother?"

"Nope," said Ran. "He's a man. He'll have to take his chances."

"I see," Anne Kilpatrick said coldly. Her voice grew stormy again; scornful, bitter. "Do you think I'd believe you? I'd sooner trust a rattler! I'd take the word of the worst Mexican *ladrone* south of the Border before yours!"

"Wait a minute, Anne!" Bill Kilpatrick urged, appearing beside her. "This man didn't prove so dangerous on the way here."

"He didn't have a chance!"

"If he's any good at all, he did have a chance from what you've told me about it." Bill Kilpatrick's face had taken on lines over night. "Malone," he said bluntly through the window, "I'm worried about my sister. Why do you want to help her?"

Ran grinned faintly. "I never knew I was as bad as a rattler or a Mex *ladrone*. Mebbe I am—but I don't fight women or see 'em hurt. That's all."

"Will you take word to my brother?" Kilpatrick asked cautiously. "I'll make it worth your while."

"Damn you, no!" Ran retorted. "I reckon you listened too hard to your sister then! You oughta knowed better than to ask that."

PARDEE walked off the front porch just then and saw Ran standing before the window. He scowled and started toward the spot.

"What's the idea of hangin' around that window, Malone?" he called.

Ran walked to meet him, drawing deliberately on the cigarette. "I was talkin' to them, Pardee."

"Talkin'? By God, what's the idea?" Pardee grated, halting before him.

"Any reason why I shouldn't? You want the window watched while your man's inside, don't you?"

"What've yuh got tuh talk tuh them about, Malone?"

"I was tryin' to find out what the jasper looked like who shot their foreman," Ran grinned.

Pardee swore. "Never mind about that! Keep away from them!"

Still grinning, Ran spoke softly: "Don't tromp on me, Pardee. I'm with you on this little gold *pasear*—but I'm still Ran Malone. I don't take kindly to bein' cussed out, unless the gent is smilin'."

"Yo're gettin' damned independent, Malone!"

"Hell, Pardee, I've been that way all along. Don't get your ropes crossed."

Scowling, Pardee started to answer that; then spat and grated: "I'm tellin' yuh tuh keep away from them if yuh want tuh stay healthy! I never did warm tuh you, Malone! I took yuh on here because we're gonna need all the gunwork we can scrape up! But I'm givin' orders around here an' I'll make it hot for the man who crosses me!"

And at midday the truth of that was borne in on Ran with unexpected suddenness.

Most of them were at the table eating dinner when two quick shots from the men standing guard out in front brought them away from the table with a rush. As they burst out of the front door, led by Black Pardee, Ran saw the guard running toward a staggering figure which had come up from the creek bank past the tall cottonwoods.

Ran swore silently to himself. Only one man could be walking in like that from the direction of the Por Nada. The man they had left at Yaqui Pool had come afoot here to the Kilpatrick ranch, to Black Pardee and his men.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man From the Well

AS HE ran with the others, Ran told himself furiously he should have thought of this, should have planned for it. But now it was too late. There was nothing to do but face it.

"My God, it's Bull Carson! He musta lost his horse!" one of the men yelled.

Carson could still stand as they gathered around him. He had gotten water back there along the creek, of course, but he was in bad shape. He had lost pounds of weight and looked more dead than alive. Pardee fired the first question as Ran came within earshot.

"What happened tuh yuh, Bull? I figgered yuh wasn't comin'."

Carson started to answer; then his glance stopped on Ran. A stream of curses came from him.

"There's the dirty son that stole my hoss and put me afoot!" he raved. "Him and that damned girl! Gimme yore gun, Pardee! I'll kill him!"

Carson tore Pardee's gun from its holster as he spoke. And Ran flipped one of his guns out as Pardee grabbed Carson's hand and shouted: "Hold on! No shootin'!"

A man caught Ran's arm from behind. Another man got the other arm. Carson, wild with fury, struggled until Pardee tore the gun away from him.

"What'n hell's all this?" Pardee exploded, glaring from one to the other of them. "Carson, are yuh sayin' Malone put yuh afoot?"

"I don't know what'n hell his name is, but that's the one!" Carson panted, thrusting his arm at Ran. "They put me afoot at Yaqui Pool! Took my guns an' hoss!"

Scowling, Pardee addressed Ran. "Yuh didn't say anything about it, Malone."

"No reason why I should. It wasn't any of your business, Pardee."

"The Kilpatrick girl brought yuh in here a prisoner. How-come yuh helped her put Bull afoot? What was the idea?"

Carson cursed thickly. "He was tied up when they hit Yaqui Pool—but she cut him loose an' they rode off together plenty socialable!"

Pardee ripped out an oath. "Yuh told me that was yore hoss, Malone! Yuh said yuh rode him into the Por Nada, leadin' the other hoss! Yuh lied tuh me, Malone! What for?"

"I don't like being questioned, Pardee."

"Yuh don't?" said Black Pardee. His eyes were narrowed now. He was thinking hard. "If yuh lied about Bull's hoss, yuh lied about the rest of it! By God, Malone, yuh knew who yuh was followin' into the Por Nada! An' yuh kept a-comin'—lookin' fer him!"

"I was brought in to be turned over to the sheriff," Ran reminded. "How could I know who'd be here?"

But Pardee's rage was rising. "Yuh followed *me* here!" he charged furiously. "When yuh found the girl afoot, yuh brought her along too! Yuh always was soft-hearted like that, Malone! But yuh kept a-comin'—after me! When yuh got a chance tuh get Bull's hoss, yuh took it! Yuh been tryin' tuh trick me, Malone! Get his guns, boys! I'll fix the skunk!"

Jumping back, Ran broke the hold on his right arm. The other man held tight to the left arm. Ran's right hand streaked for his gun. Before he could draw it, he was pistol-slugged from behind.

His knees buckled; he went down; and his last memory was of booted feet kicking him.

RAN came out of it to find log ceiling *vigas* overhead. He was on his back, looking up at them. He hurt all over. The pain which had been in his head before was mild compared to the hurt there now. He turned his head as a low voice said:

"I guess he'll be all right now."

Ran saw he was in the bedroom. Anne Kilpatrick and her brother were standing beside the bed. No particular sympathy was visible on their faces; but the girl's bitter animosity was not there either.

Ran tried to sit up. Kilpatrick helped him. The bedspread and pillow were splotched with blood. Ran's shirt was bloody too.

He was groggy, sore all over, but he found that he could stand. A mirror hanging over a hand-made chest of drawers caught his eye. Stepping to it, Ran peered at a face which hardly resembled the one he was used to.

They had given him the "boots," had kicked and trampled him unmercifully.

Anne Kilpatrick and her brother were watching him when he turned from the mirror. Ran forced a grin. It hurt.

"The man we met at Yaqui Pool walked here," Ran said to her. "He was one of Pardee's men."

"I don't see why that should have made a difference," she said gravely.

"It did. When Pardee found I'd covered up a little on how I got here, it started him thinkin'. He began to wonder what I was doin' in the Por Nada—an' he didn't like the answer."

"What *were* you doing in the Por Nada?" Anne Kilpatrick questioned.

Ran chuckled ruefully. "Not shootin' your foreman in the back. I was followin' the man who did it."

"This man Pardee?" she guessed. "Why didn't I think about it before? He's wearing bat-wings chaps also."

"You'll never prove it in a law court, so why figure? Fact is, there ain't much chance of gettin' Pardee into any court."

"One outlaw following another outlaw," the girl said. "He did something to you."

Ran grinned at her, but said nothing.

Kilpatrick said: "Malone, what do you intend to do?"

"Get outa here an' save my skin if I can," Ran said violently. "I've had enough!"

"I suppose you *would* feel that way," Anne remarked coldly.

KILPATRICK was looking slightly disgusted himself as Ran limped to the window and looked out. Cheyenne was standing out there, smoking.

"Yuh must be made outa mulehide an' jerky," Cheyenne declared. "Damned if I thought yuh'd get up again after Pardee got through with yuh."

"What's on his mind now?" Ran asked.

Cheyenne shrugged. "I'd hate tuh be in yore shoes, Malone. Pardee told the boys tuh lock yuh up an' he'd take care of yuh later. Whatever yuh done tuh Pardee, it musta been bad tuh set him off thataway. Like a crazy man, he was."

"It ain't the first time he's been crazy," Ran said curtly. "He's got a yellow streak as wide as the horns on a Sonora steer. It makes him twice as mean when he's got the upper hand."

"Yellah? Hell, yore crazy, Malone!"

"Pardee can't stand a knife," Ran said. "He never goes without a gun, if he can help it. An' he always carries a derringer in case he's cornered."

"Where'd yuh get all that?"

"I ran on the same range long enough to know his sign."

Cheyenne spat. "Too bad it won't help yuh now. Pardee's out on his hoss. When he comes back, I reckon he'll sling his loop for yuh."

"And none of you rannies'll see I get a man's chance."

"Hell! We're here after gold, Malone. If Pardee's got a feud tuh settle with yuh, that's his business."

"I figured so," Ran said mildly. He stood there at the window as Cheyenne walked on.

Then Bill Kilpatrick joined him. "Easy enough to get out this window and make a run for it, Malone," he suggested.

"An' get a bullet in your back pronto." Ran shrugged. "The horses are guarded: there's no cover. It wouldn't even be sport to stop you."

"I'll be all right, if you want to try it, Bill," Anne said suddenly.

"You remind me of a rabbit showin' its teeth at a curly wolf," Ran grinned. He saw some cut lengths of rope in a corner and picked them up. "Anybody been tied with these?"

"Both of us, at night," Bill Kilpatrick answered grimly.

The longest piece of rope was about nine feet. Ran sat down on the bed and made a running noose in one end.

"No use," Bill Kilpatrick said, watching him. "They come in that door with their guns out, ready for trouble."

"Might hang one of us from a *viga* with it," Ran said amiably. "Either one of you got a knife hid away?"

They hadn't.

"What would you do with a knife?" Anne Kilpatrick questioned alertly.

"That," Ran chuckled, "is somethin' that always comes in handy. I know a man who carried one down the back of his neck. Wish I'd got the habit."

He rolled a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully. A rib felt broken; his left arm was strained at the shoulder; a hip had been kicked until the joint seemed to be cracked. All that from Pardee, who could kick a man to death, and had; who would shoot a man in the back, leave a woman alone in a place like the Por Nada.

The gold didn't seem so important when you got to thinking about that.

The sun had set when Pardee and a companion galloped to the front of the

house. A prisoner rode between them on a travel-stained horse.

Swinging down, Pardee spoke loudly to the men who came out to meet them.

"Kilpatrick sent this chicken ahead tuh say the'd be coming on YK land through the Notch about midnight. Kilpatrick wants a fresh team for his wagon. His hosses are givin' out."

"Where's the Notch?" the nearest man asked.

"About twelve miles out. If someone don't meet 'em there, they'll be suspicious." Pardee grinned as he hitched his gunbelt up. His rasping chuckle carried to the window where Ran was listening. "We'll meet 'em all right, boys. This *hombre* says they've got eight men with guns. It'll be easy."

Behind Ran, Bill Kilpatrick groaned softly. "The Notch is a perfect place for an ambush. Harry and his men won't have a chance."

"How do you get there?" Ran asked.

CHAPTER SIX

Three Shots from Hell

PARDEE and his men were eating in the other part of the house as darkness fell. Three plates of food were brought to the bedroom. Cheyenne waited in the doorway with a drawn gun while the Mexican woman set the plates down, cast a look of frightened pleading at Anne Kilpatrick and her brother.

Ran spoke to Cheyenne. "Are you doin' all Pardee's dirty work?"

"He knows I'll drop yuh cold an' quick if there's any funny business," Cheyenne retorted, backing out, closing and locking the door.

There had been activity at the corrals. One of the men had ridden off with a harness team on lead ropes. Ran hurriedly ate some of his food blew out the lamp and stepped to the window.

A faint star-glow had replaced the last light of day. In the dead silence which fell over the bedroom, the voices of the men could be heard in the dining room. And nearer, the steps of the guard out in front scraped softly on the ground.

The man came to the open window, stopped before it and spoke suspiciously, "What's the matter with the lamp in there?"

"It went out," Ran said.

"Light it again."

"We're out of matches."

"Here's a couple." The man stepped close to the window and put them on the ledge.

He couldn't see into the room; he suspected nothing until the running noose flicked out and around his head. Then it was too late. Ran's weight on the nine foot length of rope jerked the strangling head clear over the window sill.

The guard's yell choked off at his lips. But instead of fighting the noose he pulled his gun and fired two shots into the room; then Bill Kilpatrick reached the window, grabbed the gun, wrenched it away, and slugged at the head.

"Damn him! They'll be outside quick now!" Ran snapped, letting the limp figure slide back to the ground. "You want to try it?"

"Can't!" Bill Kilpatrick said, shoving the gun into Ran's hand. "He put a bullet in my leg! Take Anne!"

And Anne Kilpatrick said fiercely, "I won't leave you, Bill!"

Ran was already going through the window. "Here they come!" he snapped. "Too late now! So long!"

He sprawled heavily over the unconscious guard, scrambled up as the front door was kicked open and men ran out.

"What's the matter, Red?" the first man yelled.

Ran stooped, fumbled for the buckle of the guard's gun-belt. He wanted those

cartridges. But the man had fallen face down on it; he was limp, heavy—and three men were off the porch now, turning toward him, and more coming.

Ran took a knife, left the belt there and slipped back along the house wall. Their eyes would not be used to the darkness for a moment yet.

But one of the men, running toward the window, stumbled over the guard before Ran could reach the corner of the long house. He saw Ran.

"There's one of them!" he shouted.

Bullets were smashing close as Ran dove around the corner of the house to brief safety. They were following him. He made the back corner of the house, cut over toward the corral; and too late realized that the horses were saddled and hitched at the back of the house.

The shots had stopped. Pardee's voice bawled orders. "Watch the hosses. Fork leather an' ride him down!"

Three cartridges were in the revolver Ran clutched in his sweating hand; perhaps four cartridges, if the man had been reckless enough to carry a full cylinder. Four bullets would do little good if Pardee's men came throwing lead. Crouching, Ran raced toward the corrals.

They knew the general direction he took; after that they sought him blind. Their comments made that plain.

'Which way'd he go?"

"I didn't see him!"

The corrals were empty. Hoofs beat hard as riders spurred out that way. Ran rolled under the bottom pole of the first corral and hugged the ground.

Men rode within twenty feet; they combed and quartered all about, gradually working away. Pardee's furious voice floated back.

One man stayed by the bunkhouse, riding slowly back and forth. Ran considered the chance of shooting him out of the saddle and getting the horse. But if he missed, if the man got away, he'd be afoot, with the rest knowing where he was.

So, leaving the corral, Ran slipped toward the creek bank. Two men only had gone this way. Neither came close. Ran waded the creek, climbed the low bank and broke into a trot, heading south.

Half an hour later the ranch buildings were out of sight and sound. Ran stopped in the sandy bed of an arroyo, built a cigarette, sat down while he considered. He had hoped for a horse, and there was no chance now of getting one. His hip was no better, his side hurt worse. A lifetime in the saddle had not helped him as a walker. But when the cigarette burned low, Ran headed for the nearest rise of ground, took his bearings, and set off in a fast, limping walk.

AN hour later, following Bill Kilpatrick's directions, he struck the wagon trail to the Notch. Straight enough until it reached the first hills, the road became rough, winding, up and down. It made hard going for high-heeled riding boots, for a man not used to walking.

The rising moon drowned starlight with silvery brilliance. But rocks, bushes, stunted trees offered cover now.

Horses came up from behind at a steady trot. Ran left the road. He was crouching behind a small bush when Black Pardee and his men rode by. Plain in the moonlight, they rode grimly, silently, with intent purpose understandable when you knew what they were riding for.

And Anne Kilpatrick was riding in their midst, head up, face stonily forward —Anne Kilpatrick, riding to that bloody gunfight with them. And there was nothing a man on foot with only three bullets could do about it.

Ran watched her out of sight; and before the sound of their passing had died

away he was limping after them, bleak-faced, cold and grim.

The Notch cut through a rocky ridge on the southeast of the ranch. Miles away, from the crest of a ridge, Ran saw that V-shaped Notch under the moon. That was the only point for a long distance where a wagon could get through from the Border.

Bill Kilpatrick had described it harshly. "It isn't wide. The sides are rocky. A hundred men could hide there, night or day, an' wipe out anyone coming through. Harry an' his men won't have much chance if they're surprised in there."

Ran had no watch. But the moon rose steadily as the hours passed. Blisters on his feet broke, and the raw flesh was rubbed sore. Muscles ached, pain grew worse. Now and then he swore at himself for being a fool.

He still wasn't clear as to what he was going to do, or why. He had wanted some of that gold in fair fight; and now he found himself wanting something else still more. He wanted Anne Kilpatrick to look at him without bitter scorn.

But above all he wanted Pardee.

As he neared the rocky ridge, Ran began to listen for shots. It was about midnight. Coyotes were yapping again; the odor of a skunk drifted down-wind; now and then a rabbit scurried away. But the landscape appeared deserted, peaceful.

Half a mile before the grade started up, Ran struck off across the rough open toward the base of the steep ridge. Soon he was climbing, gasping for breath.

Sweating, growing weak from pain and the struggle up over the rocks, Ran finally made the top and stood gulping great breaths. On both sides of the ridge the country stretched away into pale, silver distance. The crest was not wide. Walking across it, Ran looked across a flat valley to a higher barrier of hills.

And down there on the plain, a mile or so away, a pin-point of light flared, died. A match had been lighted and tossed away. That would be the Kilpatrick men, coming to the Notch—and to Pardee. . . .

Making no noise, Ran walked along the crest to the edge of the Notch. Black shadows started part-way down and filled the bottom. Dirt had washed off the side slopes, leaving rocky ledges, rocks of all sizes. Ran started down warily, keeping low and testing each foothold before he put weight on it.

At the west end of the Notch a horse whinnied softly, another stamped. But Pardee's men made no sound. The grind of steel-tired wheels approached on the grade leading up into the Notch. Men galloped on ahead of the wagon.

One of them halloed loudly. One of Pardee's men yelled back. And Ran's foot dislodged a small stone. It rolled for many feet, striking rock after rock. Pardee's annoyed voice floated up.

"Who did that? Who's up there?"

"Hell! Yuh know we're all down here, Pardee!" one of the men replied.

The riders coming on ahead of the gold-laden wagon were just entering the Notch. Ran fired two shots down the slope toward the last speaker.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Girl for Gold

PARDEE's furious yell jolted the echoes. "That's Malone, damn him! He's up there!"

Ran answered. "You're right, Pardee! I've come for you! Come with a knife! I reckon you know why!"

The wagon had halted. The Kilpatrick men rode quickly into the rocks beside the road. A hail came from them.

"Who's that? What's wrong?"

"Nine men waitin' to bushwhack your gold!" Ran shouted.

"Damn yuh, Malone! I'll kill yuh for this!" Pardee bawled from below. "You men with the wagon! Where's Harry Kilpatrick?"

"I'm here. What is it?" a curt voice replied.

"We've got yore sister an' brother, Kilpatrick! If yuh want 'em alive, throw down yore guns! Leave yore hosses there an' walk off from the wagon!"

Anne Kilpatrick's clear voice cried out: "Don't do it, Harry! They'll kill—" She broke off, cried out in pain.

Ran heard a brief scuffle; Bill Kilpatrick cried: "I'll get you for that!" And then Pardee grated: "I guess that'll hold you!" Bill Kilpatrick did not speak again.

"Cheyenne!" Pardee called. "Take Smiley an' get Malone! The rest of yuh shoot them Kilpatrick men outa the rocks!"

Ran lifted his voice again. "Don't hurt the girl, Pardee, or I'll put a knife in your throat!"

"Damn yuh, Cheyenne! Get him!"

That was Pardee's fear of cold steel speaking. An instant later two guns opened fire up the slope toward Ran. And as if it were a signal for the taut, waiting men, hell broke loose below. Both sides opened fire. And—Anne Kilpatrick was down there in the thick of it.

Bullets smashed on the rocks close to Ran as, on his stomach, he wriggled half a dozen yards down the slope to the shelter of a big boulder. Cheyenne and Smiley weren't sure where he was. Their bullets continued to strike higher up the slope. But as he dodged to the next bit of cover one of them saw him. A bullet struck close and ricocheted shrilly past his head.

One man was coming up the hill toward Ran. The flash from his gun muzzle was in a different spot each time. But he was shooting at shadows. Ran was wriggling down the slope to the shadow line, wondering where the second man was.

More Kilpatrick men had joined the first ones. They seemed to realize it was better to make a stand here among the rocks than to retreat in the open with the heavy wagon.

Of Anne Kilpatrick there was no further sign. Not thirty yards away a gun flashed again as the man made his way stubbornly up the slope where he imagined Ran to be. Then, as Ran watched that spot for an instant, a gun roared just below him, where the second man had been waiting.

The bullet struck Ran in the left arm. He fell flat, and a second shot grazed his back.

The man up the hillside shouted: "Didja get him, Cheyenne?"

With hoarse satisfaction, Cheyenne replied, "I reckon so! Knocked him over like a long-eared jack!"

Gritting his teeth from the pain, Ran thumbed back the hammer of his gun and waited. The battle below drowned out Cheyenne's movements; but, lifting his eyes to the top of the small rock which sheltered him, Ran saw a dark blot coming to him.

It hurt to put his weight on his wounded arm; but he held himself steady that way and fired his last shot carefully. The dark figure dropped, lay there.

Cheyenne was floundering weakly when Ran got to him. He tried to lift his gun and shoot. Ran stamped it to the ground, tore it out of the weak grip.

"I hope yuh fry in hell fer this!" Cheyenne gasped as Ran took his gun belt.

"I'll see you there then," Ran retorted. He was lying on the ground as he spoke, dodging shots from the other man. Cheyenne's rifle was there also. Ran took it and scrambled for the shelter of the nearest big rock. There he strapped on the belt, reloaded both hand guns.

BLOOD was streaming down his left arm. Movement hurt the arm—but he could use it stiffly.

The Smiley man was still stalking him; but cautiously now. From this point down to the road the shadows grew blacker. Ran took a chance, went down in a dodging rush and lost himself in the rocks near the road.

Pardee's men had worked nearer the other end of the Notch, to get opposite the Kilpatrick men. Ran went that way too. Down here where the moonlight did not strike, you had to be on a man before you knew who he was.

Picking the nearest gun flash, Ran stalked the man, coming up behind him. He waited a moment for another shot, and then closed in. The man heard him at the last moment and turned, calling: "Who is it?"

Ran clubbed him to the ground with a gun barrel and went on without stopping. For that man was not Pardee.

The Kilpatrick guns seemed to be slackening off. But a bullet, clipping Ran's leg, made him realize that Kilpatrick lead might drop him yet.

It did not matter much. Blood was all over his left arm—and he had to find Pardee. He dropped a second man the same way, and a third man.

Pardee's bawling voice suddenly rang out. *"Hold on everybody!"*

The Pardee men ceased firing. The Kilpatrick men followed. Everyone could hear Pardee's harsh voice.

"Cheyenne! Where's Malone?"

The Smiley man answered up the slope. "Cheyenne's dead! Gawd knows where Malone is! I can't find him!"

Harry Kilpatrick called across the road: "Anne! Where are you?"

She answered, and Ran swallowed a lump in his throat at what she said.

"He hasn't shot me yet, Harry! Don't mind me!"

Pardee called out harshly. "We're comin' across the road, Kilpatrick! Yore sister'll be in front! If you want tuh shoot, she'll get it! An' if yuh drop one of us, I'll put a bullet in her myself! Boys, get close around me!"

You could almost hear Harry Kilpatrick groan aloud. And he did the only thing he could.

"Let 'em come, men!" he ordered.

"Bill, don't be a fool!" Anne Kilpatrick cried. She was with Pardee, some thirty yards ahead.

Pardee's men began to close in to that spot. And Ran moved toward it also. A death-like silence had fallen over the Notch, broken only by boots scraping on the rocks.

Then Pardee broke it. "Let's go, boys!"

THEY were a compact little group as they moved out across the road. But you had to be close to them to see it. Ran was just behind them.

Pardee was in the middle, with Anne Kilpatrick walking in front of him. None of the men were behind Pardee. The why of that became clear in a muttered remark.

"This is a hell of a note, hidin' behind a woman's skirts!"

"Shut up, damn yuh!" Pardee flung at him. "Yuh want that gold, don't yuh? They'll hold us here all night, an' have someone ridin' for help! Yuh can thank that skunk, Malone, for this!"

And then they were across the road. Crowding close, Ran saw that Anne Kilpatrick's hands were tied behind her. Pardee was holding her wrists, and carrying a belt gun in his other hand.

Ran shoved his extra hand gun inside his belt, drew the knife he'd taken off the man back at the ranch, dropped Cheyenne's rifle—and the next moment his weak left hand caught Pardee's neck and

the knife blade was across the outlaw's throat.

"Get down!" Ran gritted softly. "Tell 'em to scatter out!"

Pardee went rigid. Breath whistled through his lips. A faint gasp came from him as he carefully went down on his knees. He spoke thickly.

"Boys' scatter out!"

"An' then what?" a voice asked.

"I'll—I'll tell yuh what tuh do."

"What's the matter? Yuh sound funny?" a man off to the left said.

"Damn yuh!" Pardee gasped. "Do what I say!"

He was down on his knees beside a huge rock. Anne Kilpatrick stood motionless. She had heard Ran's words, had turned her head, and now she stood there silently.

Ran was in a cold sweat himself. His left arm was almost useless. His head was swimming with weakness. Pardee's men, almost within arm's reach, could kill all three with a storm of lead if they found they were being betrayed. They probably would, too, and it would give Ran small satisfaction to slit Pardee's throat if Anne Kilpatrick died at the same time.

"Anne," Ran whispered to her. "Know where your brother, Harry is? Just ahead there?"

"Yes."

"Walk slowly to him. Tell him part of Pardee's men are gone. Then get down behind a rock an' stay there. You might," said Ran huskily, "say a prayer."

"And you?" said Anne Kilpatrick.

"I'll be all right. Go on."

SHE went without speaking again, walking carefully off into the night. Only the click of her small riding boots on the stones came back.

"Pardee, what yuh doin'?" a man called.

Pardee shivered, remained mute as the sharp knife edge pressed harder against his throat. He would have charged, bellowing, into the muzzle of a gun. But cold steel left him a sweating wreck.

Danny Catron had found out that back in the Texas country, when Pardee had been pistol-whipping him for pure drunken pleasure. Danny Catron had drawn his only weapon, a knife; and Pardee had bolted out of the room before he remembered he had a gun in his hand.

Within a month Danny Catron had been shot in the back. A Mexican goatherder had seen Pardee riding the same road half an hour earlier.

Pardee had been out of the Nueces country by the time Ran got back from Fort Worth. That might have been the end of it, except that Danny Catron had left a widow and three young children; and Danny Catron had been Ran Malone's best friend, though one was an outlaw and one an honest homesteader.

Now Pardee knelt with cold steel against his throat while the long seconds dragged. To the kneeling man Ran husked softly.

"You haven't forgotten Danny Catron, Pardee? He told me how you liked a knife. Danny'd like to see me cut your throat tonight. I followed you a long time, Pardee. For a little I figured I could get some of that gold for Danny's widow. But I reckon now all I can do is send you to hell after Danny!"

Pardee shuddered. The ghost of a whimper oozed from him. "Gimme a chance, Malone!"

"Like the chance you gave Danny Catron?"

Pardee's men were growing restless. "For Gawd's sake, what's the matter with yuh, Pardee?" one of them burst out in exasperation.

Low voices drifted from the rocks where the Kilpatrick men were hidden. And suddenly Harry Kilpatrick called:

"Malone! Watch yourself! We're comin' to clean out what's left of those skunks!"

Pardee had dropped his gun. Ran kicked it aside with his foot and dropped down behind Pardee as the Kilpatrick men started forward, firing as they came. They came with a rush, confident, irresistible. Pardee's men held their ground only for a moment—then they broke, scrambling back among the rocks, firing only to cover their retreat.

The wave of battle rolled past the spot where Ran and his prisoner crouched. A man turned aside, calling: "Malone!" it was Harry Kilpatrick.

"Here!" Ran said. "Here's your man.

When Harry Kilpatrick stood before them, Ran stood up, taking his knife from Pardee's throat, letting Pardee stand up.

"Man!" said Harry Kilpatrick huskily, oblivious to the lead still flying. "You don't know what you've done for me! Anne says Bill is only knocked unconscious across the road there. But if anything had happened to her, why—why—"

Pardee had stood up slowly. Kilpatrick was still fumbling for words to show his gratitude when Pardee's arm made a sudden movement, twisting, as if to shake something down out of his sleeve.

The knife in Ran's hand flashed like the strike of a snake's head. The keen blade entered Pardee's neck from the side; and as Pardee reeled aside the derringer he had shaken out of his sleeve went off with a loud report. He fell heavily, with the knife still in his neck, and kicked convulsively on the ground.

"I came a long way to get him," Ran said. "I'm kinda glad it was this way; the way he was most afraid of. He couldn't face a knife."

"I understand you're an outlaw," Kilpatrick said bluntly.

"I am."

"You're only Malone here on the YK," said Harry Kilpatrick. "There's a heap I want to say to you later. I've got to catch up with my men now. Will you go back there and watch my sister?"

"If you think she'll be all right with me."

"She said she'd never seen a man like you, Malone. She'll feel safe while you're with her."

They were still shooting down at the other end of the Notch, near the Pardee horses; but as Ran Malone limped toward Anne Kilpatrick, he hardly heard the shots. For he knew what the bitter scorn had left her and that here in the Notch he had found gold worth more than the metal bars in that steel-tired wagon.

THE END

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A HANGNOOSE FOR THE DEACON

By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

(Author of "The Deacon Goes Gun-Shy," etc.)

There was a hangnoose posse on Deacon Bottle's back trail when he met up with lovely Mona Barrier. But she was in more trouble than he—and the Deacon, always chivalrous, promised to aid her first, though he win a hemp necktie for his pains.

DEACON BOTTLE, whose twin silver-mounted pistols were as famous in Latigo as his oratorical piousness, shifted his portly bulk uncomfortably in the big chair. He allowed his mild blue eyes to sift speculatively over the interior of the Haycort ranch house before he spoke.

"Starling's too smart a sheriff," he said, "to go off half-cocked."

An expression of impatience crossed Mel Haycort's firm-jawed face. "Damn it, Deacon. He ain't got any choice. They're ridin' him." He took a pace or two, then whirled angrily back toward his friend. "You act like I was talkin' about somebody else. Well, I ain't! You're the man they've pinned the job on, an' they've got a case that's hole-proof!"

"Hell," growled the Deacon, exasperated in his turn. "Talk sense. I didn't hold up their blamed stage."

"Somebody did," snapped Haycort. "Driver an' guard both swear it was you." His perturbed glance traveled from the low-crowned black hat on the table to the shabby black frock coat which hung from the Deacon's broad shoulders. "You ain't a man that it's easy to mistake," he finished.

"Or hard to duplicate," amended Deacon Bottle pointedly.

Haycort stared. "You mean some gent picked up a hat an' coat like yours, so it'd seem—"

"With a mask, o' course," suggested the Deacon. "Why not?"

A sigh of relief escaped Haycort. "I might as well admit, Deacon, I figgered all along that you done it. This way, it ain't so hard. All you got to do is show where you were this afternoon. . . ."

Deacon Bottle spread his pudgy hands. "Even that's a heap more'n I can do, Mel."

The Deacon's moon-like countenance, ordinarily untroubled, contracted in a frown as the full meaning of his plight sank home. When Haycort had come racing through the dusk from Latigo, the Deacon had been inclined to scoff at the message he bore and the story that the sheriff was forming a posse to bring him in. Now, his old friend's deadly intentness corrected him. Haycort meant what he said. The charge was dynamite.

What galled the good Deacon most was his complete innocence. While it was commonly believed—though never definitely established—that many of Deacon Bottle's activities were conducted without the sanction of the Law, this had not been the case on the afternoon in question. He had been engaged in nothing more lawless than wandering through the rugged North Hills. While it was an old habit of his, the excursion had been pointless. He had only been out on a trip through the hills which he loved.

Obviously, whoever had impersonated him had checked his movements and noted his departure from Latigo. Before his return, according to Haycort, the Winton stage had been stopped and looted of some three thousand dollars intended for the mines in the North Hills. Coupled with his own questionable reputation, the sworn testimony of the two men would be irretrievably damning.

Haycort's eyes had narrowed. "Deacon, you're in for it."

Too accustomed to the devious twistings of fate to mourn over what could not be helped, Deacon Bottle's mind was already casting for a solution.

"I ain't lookin' out from between bars yet, Mel. Maybe there's a way. Who was toolin' the rig?"

"New man. Mort Carbis."

"Carbis, eh?" mused the Deacon. "Used to work for Rex Congdon, which just about spots him. If Carbis drowned, Mel, they'd look for him upstream—he's that ornery. Who was ridin' with him?"

"Lynn Lassen. A square kid, Deacon."

"Yeah. Square as they come, or always has been. Somethin' funny there, Mel. First time Lassen's ever let a holdup get away from him. How'd it happen?"

"I ain't sure," grumbled Haycort, "an' nobody else is." He stared bleakly at the Deacon. "There's somethin' haywire about the whole damn' business. Lassen is

sore as hell; why, I don't know. Carbis is keepin' his trap shut. Both barrels of Lassen's scatter-gun had been fired."

Deacon Bottle climbed ponderously to his feet. "I reckon I better have a talk with Lassen."

"Are you crazy?" Haycort exploded. "You can't set foot within a mile of Latigo. A posse was buildin' when I left. Far as that goes, you can't stay here. This'll be one of the first places they'll look. All you can do is hit for the hills, an' stay there till this gets ironed out. I'll do all I can; so will Starling an' some of the rest."

Deacon Bottle held out a pudgy hand, took Haycort's and gripped it. "Thanks, Mel. I ain't draggin' you into this if I can help it. It'll be time enough to ask for help if they catch me." In the flickering lamp light the Deacon's face was grim. . . .

THROUGH the cold darkness of the winter night Deacon Bottle jogged toward Latigo. The pulled-up collar of his frayed frock coat supplied little protection against the chill. He rode hunched in the saddle, his mind dwelling with a shade of bitterness on his predicament. So swiftly and unexpectedly had the calamity descended that the Deacon was only now becoming fully reconciled to it. Outlawed! And for no good reason. It was not his first brush with the Law, but always before there had been mitigating circumstances. Here there were none. He had simply been trapped by a dirty little intrigue.

He did not blame Sheriff Enoch Starling, whose gruff loyalty had saved the Deacon on more than one occasion. Provided with direct evidence, the lawman could do nothing but act.

So engrossed was Deacon Bottle in his somber reflections that he missed the first floating drum of hoofbeats. Only when the sound rose to a feverish tattoo did his head jerk up. A pudgy hand raced to gun butt as he pulled his pony in. The sound was juggled deceptively by hill shoulders, and in the shrouding darkness the Deacon could not instantly pick the direction from which it came. That second of hesitation was too much. The pounding hoofs roared at him—from a trail which met the one he was following at right angles!

Through the blackness a horse's head came thrusting at him. There was a snort of terror. The strange horse reared sharply, swerved, catapulted against the shoulder of the Deacon's pony. The Deacon had a vague glimpse of a pale blot which was a face, and of a white hand snatching for the saddle horn and missing it.

Then the scene was impenetrable as ink again. The Deacon's mount was trembling, but holding steady. The scrambling racket of the escaping horse died slowly away.

Deacon Bottle sat motionless in the saddle. Had that other rider been thrown? His own safety would be jeopardized if he stopped. The posse was undoubtedly already on the way from Latigo. The rider would probably know that he, the Deacon, was a wanted man.

A frown on his plump face, Deacon Bottle stepped down, dropping the reins to the ground. He cocked a keen ear, heard nothing. "Hurt, feller?" he called softly.

There was no answer. Moments passed, and then a stifled groan drifted through the cold air. Deacon Bottle felt his way cautiously in that direction. He fumbled for a match and scratched it on his boot.

As the sulphur flared, he swore softly. It was a girl, her hair tumbling down over a white forehead, the long-lashed lids dropped over her eyes. Before the match flickered out her curving lips had parted, and she gasped fiercely, "I won't

go back. You—you can't make me go back."

"Easy," counseled the Deacon. "Take it easy." He straightened, got the canteen from behind the saddle, and after wetting her forehead with the cool liquid forced a little between her lips.

Under that stimulation the girl moved, twisted in the Deacon's arm which had raised her head and shoulders. The Deacon had recognized her as Mona Barrier, the ward of Jed Toole. The stories circulated about Toole occurred to the Deacon swiftly. Owner of a little horse and cattle outfit of dubious reputation, the man was said to have warrants issued against him in Idaho. He was surly, a hard drinker and a dangerous rough-and-tumble fighter. Why he had accepted custody of his sister's daughter no one was sure, but those who had occasion to visit the ranch reported that the girl lived there in virtual slavery.

The girl's breath was coming in short bursts. "Who—who are you?" she whispered.

"Nothin' to worry about," the Deacon chuckled. "It's Deacon Bottle." He caught himself immediately, wondering if she had heard of the robbery. "Feelin' better?" he added quickly.

The girl had relaxed as he pronounced his name. "Don't make me go back," she pleaded. A sob choked her for a moment, and the Deacon felt very awkward and clumsy. "I'll—I'll be all right. If you'll—help me catch my horse."

In the darkness Deacon Bottle shook his head. "The bronc high-tailed it, kid. Nothin' short of a cyclone'd run him down now."

The words roused some fiery strength in the girl, for she stumbled to her feet. "I don't care," she cried desperately. "I'll walk. Which—which way is Latigo?"

But she was swaying, and one of the Deacon's arms went around her shoulder to steady her. "No use talkin' that way," he admonished. "Might be I could lend a hand. This bronc of mine's packed double before."

Though he could not see her face, he could feel the intentness of her scrutiny. She had regained control of herself, and her voice had a quiet, even ring. "Maybe you wouldn't want to, Deacon. I'm running away. If Jed Toole finds that you've helped me, he—he might do anything."

"Runnin' to any place in particular?"

"Yes. To Lynn Lassen. He's going to take me away from here."

For a long moment Deacon Bottle said nothing. If Lynn Lassen, who was square, should leave the country, the Deacon knew how little chance there would be of clearing up the details of the robbery.

"All right," he said slowly. "I was goin' there myself. I reckon, then, you hadn't heard about the hold-up?"

Mona Barrier stiffened. "Not Lynn?"

"Nothing happened to him. They want me for the job. I didn't do it, but they think I did. We'll have to be a little careful goin' in. Ready, are you?"

RIDING on in to Latigo, with the girl astride behind him, Deacon Bottle heard Mona Barrier's story. Though it was told with a courageous understatement, the grimness of it could not be kept out. It was the harsh story of vicious brutality visited on a waif who could not help herself; of years of drudgery which would have stifled the flame in most spirits. Unable to leave at first, fear had held her from it later. The furious temper of Jed Toole had been reason enough. Then, secretly, she had met Lynn Lassen. Knowledge of his love for her had given Mona Barrier the grit to go on until her chance came. Tonight, so drunk he could hardly stand, Jed Toole had tried to beat her, and had made vague, terrible

threats against Lassen. She had slipped out of the house, determining to ride to the man she loved.

And Deacon Bottle, hearing it all in silence, had said between his teeth, "I'll help you, kid, if it's the last thing I ever do." He had said it recklessly, heedless of the consequences; and the pressure of Mona Barrier's hand on his arm told him that she trusted his word.

They reached Lynn Lassen's—by what skillful maneuvering only the Deacon could have told, for the girl followed him blindly. A thin outline of light filtered from the shaded window. It was a two room cabin set back some little distance from the main street.

A tap on the door brought Lassen to it. He sucked in his breath sharply as he saw Mona and he had taken her, almost roughly, by the shoulders before he saw the Deacon.

"The light don't agree with me," said Deacon Bottle evenly. "Get inside an' close the door."

Inside, Deacon Bottle put his back against the door and looked at Lynn Lassen. The jaw of the shotgun guard who had ridden the fated stage was set. Color was flushing angrily into his freckled face, and his six-foot-plus of lithe sinew and bone was poised. He seemed to have forgotten that the girl was there.

"God, you've got guts—comin' here," he said in a low voice.

Studying him shrewdly, the Deacon knew that something was wrong. Lynn Lassen's anger was deeper, more involved than it should have been. "Maybe there's more'n one way of lookin' at it," he said.

"Think I don't know you're one of 'em?" Lassen blurted hoarsely.

The girl caught Lassen's arm, puzzled and frightened. "Lynn, you mustn't—"

Lassen checked her savagely. "Not now, Mona. You don't know what's happened. They framed me—Deacon Bottle here along with the rest of 'em!"

A peculiar brilliance lashed to the surface of the Deacon's ordinarily mild blue eyes. "Hold on, kid! You're talkin' too fast. It wasn't me held up your stage."

"Not you? Hell, I seen you with my own eyes."

"A hat like mine, maybe, an' a coat, but not me."

Lassen jerked his head furiously. "Think a yarn like that'll go down?"

But the Deacon, too, was growing wrathful. Low and sharp, his voice drove at the younger man. "I know what it's worth. But if I had held up that stage do you reckon I'd be comin' here? What for? So you could turn me in? Don't be a fool."

"Can't you see he's telling the truth?" It was the girl. Her tone held a strange mingling of pleading and command. "Lynn, I—I believe him. He helped me—get here, Lynn!"

Lassen's piercing glance swiveled from the Deacon to Mona Barrier and back again. "If that's true, Deacon—"

"Bank on it," Deacon Bottle retorted crisply. "What I come to find out is what happened on that run from Winton. Want to spill it to me?"

Lynn Lassen's wide shoulders lifted. "It's easy told. Just 'fore we pulled out of Winton I dodged into Pop Drake's for a cup of coffee, leavin' my scattergun in the boot. I checked the gun again when we left, like I always do. Everything seemed all right. Then, 'bout fifteen miles out of Winton, you—or this gent that looked like you—comes slidin' his bronc down a cutbank in front of the stage. I made a grab for the gun, o' course, got it an' gave him both barrels. It was point-blank, an' I couldn't have missed. He wasn't more'n a dozen yards off. Well, damn it, he didn't move; stood there holdin' a bead on me with his six.

There wasn't no shot in them shells; somebody'd drawed it—while I was gettin' my Java most likely. What could I do? Another move out of me an' I'd uh been drilled."

"You reckon the driver, Carbis, fixed the shells?"

"He ain't talkin'," snapped Lassen.

"He could be made to," the Deacon was pointing out when a sound outside made him stop. Buggy wheels were crunching the dirt of the street outside. Deacon Bottle threw a quick glance around the room. There was nothing there that might offer concealment. The rear room was little more than a lean-to. "Just in case," said the Deacon softly, and faded back through the doorway.

HE was no more than out of sight when the front door was flung open without warning. A burly figure lunged out of the darkness into the light of the cabin. His shrewd little eyes blinked at the glare, then lit with satisfaction as they spied the girl.

"Figgered you'd come here, my dear," he sneered.

Mona Barrier drew up against the wall as far from him as she could get. "I won't go back with you," she whispered.

Jed Toole grinned wickedly. He was a heavy-set man, curiously quick of movement, with a face mottled and scarred by hard living. He was drunk, but his own strength was greater than the strength of the liquor. "Maybe you won't need to," he stated cryptically.

His mouth taut, Lynn Lassen said, "You'll never lay a hand on Mona again, Toole."

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't," snarled Toole. He crossed deliberately to the stove, drew off his heavy gloves and began to warm his hands. "Depends on how much sense you got."

Lassen shifted his feet carefully. "Meanin' what?"

"I ain't talkin' for myself," Toole replied craftily. "I'm talkin' for some gents who don't want a square guard on the Winton run." He paused to let that sentence sink in. "Get what I mean?"

"Yeah, I reckon I do."

"All right. Play it their way an' you can have the girl here, free an' clear. If you don't, they'll break you. Carbis'll swear that you fired both barrels of your gun in the air, makin' damn' sure you wouldn't hit the Deacon. That'll tie you in on the job, an' you'll be lucky if you don't get sent up for it."

"You'll play hell pinnin' that on me," Lynn Lassen bit out. "Take your proposition an' clear out. Tell whoever sent you that the next time there'll be shot in my gun."

Anger dyed Jed Toole's mottled features a deeper hue. "Suit yourself, Lassen." He snapped his eyes toward Mona Barrier. "Get along outside!"

"Wrong again," Lassen said huskily. "She ain't leavin'." He took a step toward Toole, stopped abruptly as Toole, crouching, whipped out a gun. Lynn Lassen was unarmed.

Toole grinned. "Think so? Don't move, kid. I'd as leave plug you as not. Mona! Get on out there!"

For a frightened moment the girl's eyes clung to Jed Toole. Then they lifted to the black doorway behind him. Drunk though he was, Toole must have drawn his warnings from that changing glance, for Deacon Bottle had moved soundlessly.

In a flash-like movement Toole was pivoting his weapon when the steel barrel of a silver-mounted revolver crashed down against his skull. His heavy body collapsed, and he lay face down without moving.

His round face expressionless, Deacon

Bottle knelt down and ran his hand under the man's coat. The heart was beating steadily. "No damage," he explained briefly. He saw Mona Barrier run to Lassen, bury her head in the hollow of his shoulder, but he was not thinking of that. He was wondering what to do with Jed Toole. Toole held the key to this deadly mixup; if he was not concerned in it directly, he knew who was. The Deacon judged that he could take Toole into the hills, work the information out of him. But that would get him nowhere. Back in Latigo, Toole would deny everything.

There was another solution. Let the man go free to do as he pleased. He would make another move; that was sure. This business of Lynn Lassen and the Winton stage run had just begun. There was money and high-grade ore going both ways. They—Toole or the men behind him—wanted Lassen out of the way. Lassen would have to be the bait. But the boy would welcome that, and he was well able to take care of himself.

Deacon Bottle looked up sharply at Lassen and the girl. "Better get Mona down to the hotel," he instructed. "She'll be safe enough there. With folks around, Toole won't dare touch her." He stopped, remembering something Mona Barrier had told him. "Or were you two figgering on pullin' out of here?"

"With all this hangin' fire?" growled Lassen. "Not me."

Deacon Bottle chuckled. "Fair enough, kid."

The girl left Lassen's arms and came slowly to the Deacon. "Deacon, if it hadn't been for you—I don't know what I can do to thank you." Then her arms went around his neck and she had kissed him full on the lips. But as she drew away, distress rubbed out the happiness in her eyes. "Deacon, what are you going to do?"

"Me?" said Deacon Bottle gruffly. "Don't worry about me. I'll make out."

Then they got Jed Toole out and into his rig. With the cold wind whipping over him it would not be long before consciousness returned.

When it was done, Deacon Bottle took one of Mona Barrier's small hands in his two plump ones. "No use foolin' you," he said quietly. "This thing ain't over yet. But I ain't forgettin' that promise I made to you. If anything happens, leave word with Mel Haycort. I'll do what I can."

"Deacon—!" she protested. But the Deacon was gone.

WHEN daylight broke, revealing a low-hanging mass of scudding gray clouds, Deacon Bottle knew that snow was on its way. He was stiff with the cold of a night spent in the hills. Outlawed! That thought was gnawing at him bitterly.

During the length of that sullen and miserable day the Deacon haunted the trail over which the Winton stage passed. Shortly after daylight the vehicle rattled past him from the direction of Latigo. During the winter months traffic was so light, almost nonexistent in fact, that the runs were cut in half. Tomorrow the stage would return from Winton, and on the day following, leave from Latigo again.

For an hour or two the Deacon paced it at a distance of almost a mile. But if he was searching for a rider who wore a low-crowned black hat and a frock coat resembling his own, he was disappointed. There was none.

Later in the day, when he had circled back in the direction of Latigo, he saw two parties of horsemen working slowly through the hills. They were posses, he thought grimly, looking for him. Occasional flurries of snow swept down from the peaks, and the Deacon shivered. He knew it would not be long before it would be impossible for him to stop in the open.

It was late that night when, very carefully, he made his way to the Haycort ranch house. The lean Mel Haycort grumbled a gruff greeting as he let him in through the darkened kitchen.

"By God, it's good to see you, Deacon. You shouldn't uh come, though. You shouldn't uh come. They're watchin' this place like hawks."

Deacon Bottle shrugged out of his sopping frock coat. "Don't tell me that. I passed a pair of gents smokin' an' argurin' on the way in. Left my bronc in a draw 'bout half a mile south." Drawing off his boots he looked up keenly at his friend. "Mel, there didn't anybody leave a message for me?"

"Hell, no. Hungry, ain't you, Deacon? Sit tight an' I'll throw a little grub together."

When Deacon Bottle was tearing wolfishly into a smoking plate of beans and biscuits, Haycort resumed his admonitions.

"You can't stay, Deacon. It'd be suicide. They keep droppin' in here, shakin' the place down from corral to gate post. They figger that sooner or later they're goin' to find you here."

The Deacon gulped a mouthful of hot biscuit. "Starling been out, has he?"

"Yeah. First thing. His hands are tied, Deacon. He says your word's good enough for him, but he ain't the judge an' jury. Somebody's raisin' a smoke screen, Deacon. Somebody's plumb anxious to get the idee planted that you done the job. Ain't givin' folks a chance to forget it. There's hired posses out that the county ain't payin' for."

Each minute in the warm comfort of the house was precious to Deacon Bottle, but vital danger lurked side by side with the relief of it. All too soon they were going through the darkened kitchen again, and Haycort was pleading, "Come when you can, Deacon, but don't take chances. The kitchen will be dark when the house is clear."

He got through again and back into the hills. The next day was bitterly cold, yet Deacon Bottle dared not light a fire. Riders were still scouring the country. By nightfall the Deacon's face was gray and haggard. The aching numbness crept from his limbs into his brain. He told himself that the only sensible thing for him to do was ride out of range of the relentless manhunt. But stubbornly he refused to do that.

And late evening found him heading down for Haycort's. It began to snow a little, and he was soon wet to the skin. The ride took longer than he had expected. The Deacon was growing very tired.

There was a glow in the kitchen window when he came in sight of it through the sifting flakes, but Deacon Bottle did not care. He was too cold and stiff. He had trouble finding the door knob; his hand had never been so clumsy.

He was aware after that of Mel Haycort's firm-jawed face staring at him. Haycort was shaking him by the shoulder, hissing at him: "They're out in front, Deacon! Damn it—!"

Then hot coffee was scalding his throat. He was spilling it down the front of his chest, but he did not mind the burn. It cleared his head, dragged that blurring veil away from his vision.

"Anybody—leave word for me, Mel?" he demanded huskily.

"Forget that," snapped Haycort.

But the Deacon's eyes were burning. "You got something, Mel! Where is it?"

Reluctantly Haycort produced a folded slip of paper from his pocket. "You ain't in any condition," he said grimly. "She should have knowed better."

Deacon Bottle didn't hear him. The words penciled on that slip of paper were branding themselves on his tired brain.

Lynn is hurt. They tried to kill him this afternoon. He is going to Winton with the stage, he said. If he does he will never come back.

Mona.

TWICE Deacon Bottle read it without stopping. Then, breaking through his harsh concentration, came a strident shout from Haycort. The Deacon's head snapped up. A man was framed in the doorway leading to the front of the house. Mel Haycort had spun around, dragging his revolver; it was swinging in his right fist.

"Get started!" Haycort bawled. "I'll hold 'em."

For a split second Deacon Bottle hesitated, weighing the chance of Haycort's being hurt. He made a snap decision against that possibility, swung his ponderous body around, jerked open the back door. The paper fluttered out of his hand to the floor.

Snow flakes were pattering against his face. He heard someone shout: "Go back out the front way! Get him!" Then he was running through the light covering of snow. The jet darkness would cover his tracks. He had to get to his horse; that one burning thought drove him on.

From behind him drifted a weird jumble of cries. "Spread out! Spread out, damn it! Somebody get a lantern." But there were no shots. If there were the Deacon knew he would have to go back. He couldn't leave Mel Haycort to gun it out alone.

He stumbled and fell as he hit the gully in which he had left his horse. Haycort was all right, he muttered to himself. His left foot jammed home in the stirrup, and he swung up into the saddle. They wouldn't expect him to go to Latigo. So he swung wide in a circle and headed for town. When a lantern was found they could trail him, of course. But it would be slow work, even then.

He gave the bronc its head. Its own judgment on that dark snowy night would be better than the Deacon's.

From under his down-slanting hatbrim Deacon Bottle kept an apprehensive eye cocked in the direction of the invisible eastern horizon. How much time remained before dawn he was not sure. He guessed that the margin was a scant one. At dawn the stage would be pulling out for Winton. Lynn Lassen, wounded, would try to ride with it. The boy would be going solely on his nerve, probably. Deacon Bottle's jaws locked. Mona Barrier was right. It would be a run from which Lynn Lassen would never return alive. . . .

The Deacon did not notice the cold any more. A new strength had sprung through him there in Mel Haycort's kitchen. The coffee had helped. The note from the girl had helped more. She trusted him, was depending on him. That realization did something to the outlawed Deacon Bottle.

Desperation stabbed through him as he saw suddenly that the sky had begun to lighten. Dimly he could make out the gray curtain of swirling flakes. He had not been able to see them before. The Deacon swore in a harsh mutter. He wouldn't make it in time!

Then a dark shape loomed on his right, vanished, and the grim constriction went out of the Deacon's throat. He was there. It was Latigo. In that gloomy mixture of darkness and light which is dawn, the hazy bulks of buildings began to hedge him in.

"Careful," the Deacon warned himself. "Careful."

THE stage office lay on the far side of town. Half a block from it Deacon Bottle quit his horse, and holding close to the dark line of building fronts, ran on. He loosened one of the silver-

mounted sixguns in its holster. Caution forced him to slow his pace as the high back of the coach came thrusting at him. It was still more dark than light. Crouching against the building corner, Deacon Bottle waited, straining his eyes.

He picked out the figure of Mort Carbis, climbing up over the wheel. Beyond, scarcely visible, a hostler was standing at the off leader's head. Striding leisurely, a broad-shouldered figure stepped away from the front of the office. It was Lynn Lassen; he was holding his left arm awkwardly, as if it was in sling. He put his foot on the hub, reached with his good hand for the seat rail.

It happened so quickly then that Deacon Bottle was powerless to prevent it. The hostler darted back to where Lassen was climbing. His hand and arm rose in the air, swung down hard. The sickening thud of the blow reached even to the Deacon. Lassen fell backward, sprawling in the snow.

Deacon Bottle's muscles tensed, but he held himself. He couldn't make out what they were going to do. He heard Carbis' crisp angry mutter. "Get him inside. Hurry, man!"

The hostler had unlatched the door. He was shouldering the unconscious Lassen into the dark interior. Deacon Bottle got it then. Out along the road somewhere they would put a bullet through the defenseless Lassen. A trumped-up story of a hold-up—Lassen killed—and the murder blamed on him, the Deacon, would clear them.

Carbis' whip snapped. The hostler was climbing to the seat beside him as the coach broke free under the lunging drive of the four horses. Deacon Bottle waited no longer. The crunch of his plunging boots was drowned out by the creaking rattle of the stage-coach. He caught the rail along the top at the back, clung to it, and inch by inch pulled himself up.

He lay flat along the top, the snow whirling into his face. With one hand he steadied himself against the sway; the other held a gun.

He waited a minute more to catch his breath, his eyes riveted to the backs of the two men in front of him. A thought which had lain vaguely at the back of his mind forced itself on him now. There was one thing wrong in his guesswork. Carbis and the hostler could have had no way of knowing in advance that there would be no passengers. Then what they had done had been done on the spur of the moment. Had there been any previous plan? Was there a man with a hat and frock coat resembling the Deacon somewhere along the Winton road?

He heard the hostler demanding, "What you reckon the high-grade'll fetch, Mort?"

Deacon Bottle thumbed back the hammer of the gun in his hand. That sound, slight as it was, made the hostler whirl. His jaw dropped open; blank astonishment leaped into his face.

"Take it easy, both of you," advised the Deacon. He grinned at the driver's impotent snarl of rage. "You, Carbis, keep pokin' right along the way you're goin'. I know the road, an' if you get off it you'll test high in lead."

"You can't get away with it!" Carbis cried hoarsely.

"Maybe not, but I can sure try," said the Deacon. "There ain't goin' to be a stick up this mornin', is there, Carbis?"

"How in hell would I know?"

Deacon Bottle chuckled. "Sure. That was a fool question, wasn't it? We'll all set right where we are an' find out."

THE stage-coach rattled another mile, and no one spoke. Then abruptly the hostler cried shrilly. "It ain't you that'll git it, Mort. It's me. I ain't goin' to set here an' git plugged."

"Shut up!" the driver growled at him.

"I won't! He'll think I'm Lassen, Mort. He'll—"

The harsh bark of a pistol rose over the sound of his choked voice. The hostler caved in the middle and rolled off the side of the seat. The coach jolted as the rear wheel passed over him.

That jolt saved Mort Carbis' life. He had shouted "Look out!" the instant the shot was fired from somewhere out in the flickering snow, and had jumped. The jolt threw the Deacon's arm out of line as he tried to stop him.

Unchecked, the horses plunged wildly, thrown into a panic by the shots. The leaders swerved, tried to climb a cut-bank on the left. The coach swayed perilously, toppled. So quickly did it happen that Deacon Bottle had no chance to save himself. He tried to spring clear and failed. The upper part of his body was free, but his legs were pinned.

Grimly he tightened his grip on the six-shooter in his right fist. There was a mounted figure atop the cut-bank, a bulky figure which—it could be clearly seen despite the snow—was clad in a low-crowned black hat and a black frock coat!

A gun roared again. Deacon Bottle saw the orange-red flash against the black coat, and felt the lead chunk into the snow beside him. The Deacon shot once, aiming with care. He knew he could not miss. The figure on the horse slumped forward over the saddle horn, hung there as if caught, and then sprawled to the ground. . . .

How long the Deacon lay there in the snow after that he was never sure. He was very tired and was growing numb when horses came thudding up from the direction of Latigo.

The Deacon grinned as Mel Haycort bent over him. "What in hell—you doin' here, Mel?"

"Read the note," grumbled Haycort. "I come humpin' an' routed out Starling. You're a blamed idiot, Deacon."

It took Starling and Haycort both to get the Deacon from under the coach. His legs were bruised but unbroken. Carbis was gone. Lynn Lassen, still badly shaken, but alive, was taken from the inside of the coach and given first aid.

The rugged, mustached Enoch Starling looked first at the still black figure on the lip of the cut-bank, and then at the Deacon. "Jed Toole," he said quietly. "I reckon that clears you, Deacon."

Deacon Bottle took a pull at the flask Mel Haycort had handed him. He smacked his plump lips and passed it to Lynn Lassen. "You'll be seein' Mona," he said. "Tell her I ain't sorry I made that promise, an' I ain't sorry I kept it."

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Death's Saddlemates

By WALT COBURN

(Author of "Partner from Hell," etc.)

Cow folks said that Bob Badger had gone bronc and that his girl's father, following his sign, would bring him swiftly to the grim range justice meted out to all bushwhack killers.

THE trail herd coming out of Mexico in the early dawn looked like shadows moving against the gray background. The tall man riding up on the left point doubled over his saddle horn, his lean frame racked with coughing. He covered his mouth with a gloved hand. It was several minutes before he straightened up. His face was as gray as the sky and there was blood on the palm of the worn buckskin glove. There was a hopeless, burning look in his sunken, bloodshot eyes. This cold raw air was hell on a man with a bullet punctured lung.

Yesterday's dust, puffed up by the shuf-

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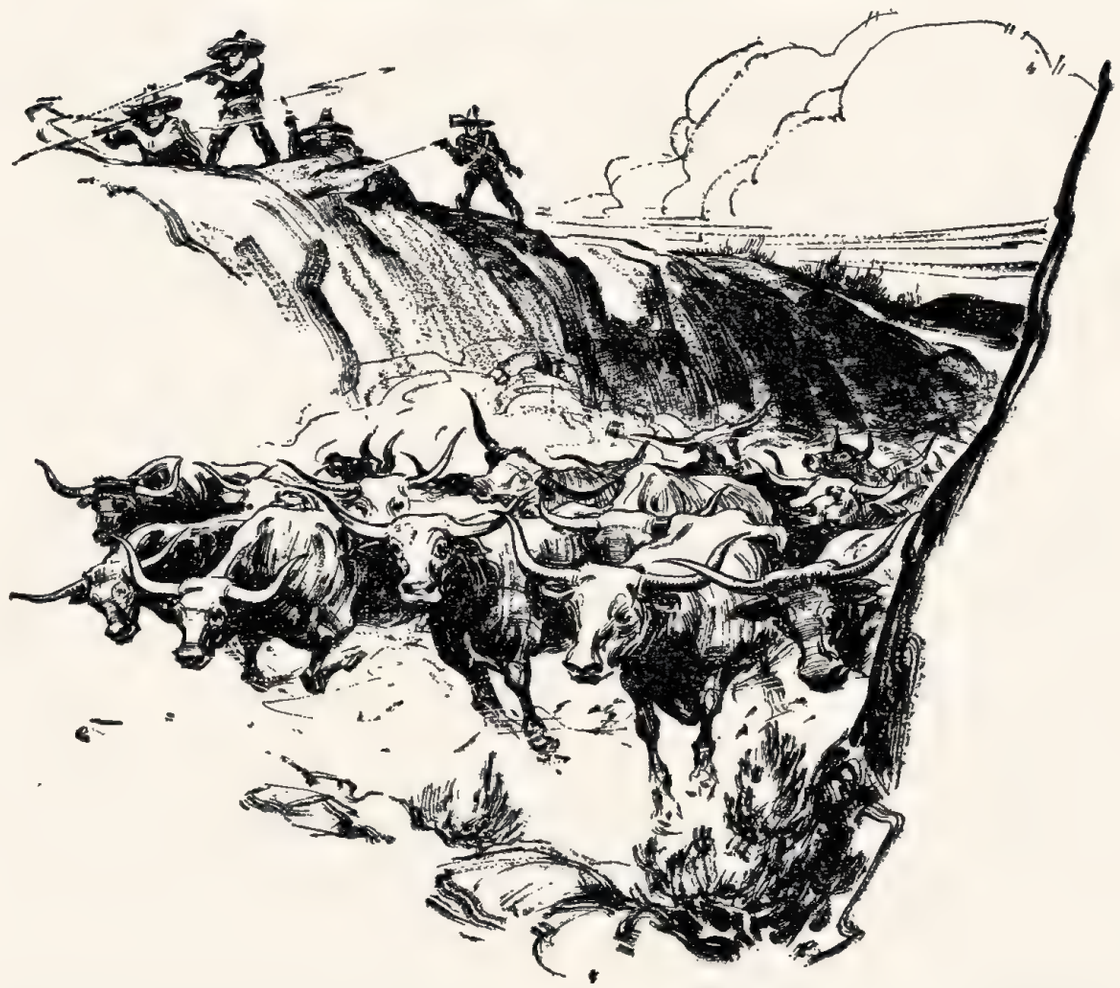
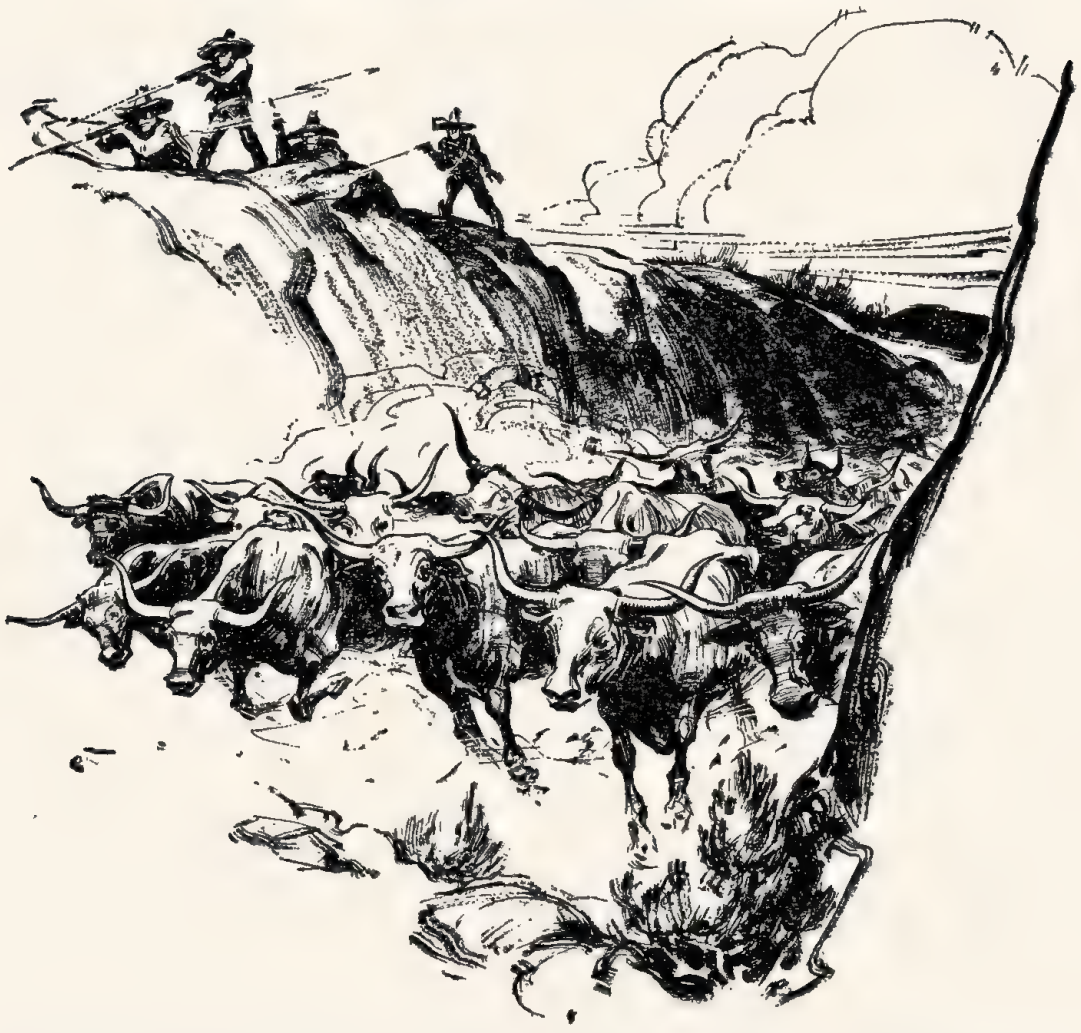
Gripping Border - Country Novelette



fling hoofs of the Mexican cattle, had filled the man's lungs choking full. The cold air of early dawn made him want to cuss. It was just plain hell so he took a drink of green tequila. The stuff wasn't a week old but a rustler in Mexico can't afford to be choosey. It was better than alkali water and it warmed a man's insides—made him forget, too, sometimes if he took on enough of it. Only it was bad to drink too much because it made a man sick.

Somtimes, like last night, you rode all night. It was all a part of the game though it would kill you soon. That drunken doctor he'd dragged out of a lousy bed that night two weeks ago down yonder in Mexico had told Jay Fletcher to rest and drink lots of fresh milk and eat half a dozen raw eggs every day, and go light on tobacco and liquor. But where could a man get fresh milk or eggs? You don't milk these wild Mexican cows, and the only eggs you could get on the desert or in the rough mountains would be buzzard eggs. Smoking made you cough but the taste of the smoke was good in your mouth—and tequila made you warm inside.

Handling wet cattle wasn't any man's cinch. But Jay Fletcher wasn't whining. There wasn't any of the yellow cur in his



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Handling wet cattle wasn't any man's cinch. But Jay Fletcher wasn't whining. There wasn't any of the yellow cur in his

make-up. He was a true Texan and as tough as jerky. . . .

He dropped back a ways to talk to the men riding the swing and the others at the drag end of the trail herd.

"Watch for trouble when we git into Buzzard Pass."

He pulled the carbine from its scabbard and rode with the gun laid across the saddle in front of him. He was up on the point again, his bloodshot eyes staring ahead into the uncertain light. A younger cowboy on the right point was riding with his weight in one stirrup, his saddle gun in the crook of his arm.

"They don't make any better cowboys than Bob Badger," Jay told himself as he took another drink of raw tequila. He hoped young Bob off there to his right would quit this rustling business and settle down. Bob Badger was too young to be taking these damn fool risks. And that little schoolmarm with the buckskin colored hair and eyes the color of smoke was worrying her heart out about it. She was a game little girl, Clara Carr. Bob called her Palomino, Pal for short, on account of her hair that was the color of a palomino horse's mane.

BOB had shifted his saddle gun. He pointed ahead. Jay signaled back. He, too had seen that rider rimming up the brushy side of the pass where the canyon narrowed.

There was a puff of powder smoke up there in the brush. A bullet snarled past Jay Fletcher's ear. As the echoing crack of the rifle came to him, the trail boss took two quick shots at the man up there in the brush. There was a sharp cry, and a riderless horse came down the twisting trail, stepping on dragging bridle reins. One or both of Jay's rifle bullets had found their target. The frightened horse was jerked up as the reins caught in some brush. It wore a Mexican saddle with a flat horn as big around as a small plate.

Then out of the early gray dawn came other shots. The big steer in the lead whirled, wounded, bawling crazily as he hooked at another steer. The bullet had struck the critter in the neck, then ripped into the base of one long, black-pointed horn. The other steers, suddenly panicked, began to mill. Bob Badger and the other cowboys were returning the fire directed at them from the bushy slopes on either side of the narrow canyon. Cattle were running, bawling, scattering to the ends of hell. Jay Fletcher cussed through blood-flecked lips as he tried to straighten out the tangle so that the stampeding steers would take the right direction. And through it all lead was whining and droning like hornets stirred up.

Only for that cloudburst yesterday evening that had held them up three hours or more, they'd have been through Buzzard Pass in the night. That's what Jay Fletcher had planned. He'd waited for a moonless night. But when the coming daylight caught them it was too late to turn back or hold the herd. They had to keep moving; had to take the risks though bad luck was trapping them. Rustling was a fool's game. . . .

A wild Mexican yell, the insulting words of a Border war cry, profane, mocking, screamed out over the bedlam of bullets and steers.

"Aviso, Gringo!"

"Pablo Rance!" called Bob Badger, taking a snapshot at a man up in the brush, "It's Pablo Rance, Jay!"

"I got a bullet with Rance's name on it," gritted the grizzled leader of the rustlers. "Damn his half-breed hide."

The fight was on, now. Jay Fletcher and Bob Badger did their best to get the cattle running through the pass. Every second counted.

Bob Badger, tanned, freckled across his short nose, was grinning. His eyes, a mixture of gray and brown, were dancing with the excitement of it all. But his strong white teeth were clenched and his blunt jaw was set at a fighting angle.

"Come out of the brush and fight, you half breed son of a snake!" he yelled, jerking the lever of his carbine.

Then from behind came the wild rush of stampeded cattle. Bob Badger and his horse were caught in the mad rush of terrified steers, and he had all he could do to keep his mount from being hooked down and trampled by the wild cattle that had gone mad with fear. He kept holding his horse on a light rein, giving the gelding just enough pull to guide him and keep him on balance. Up ahead two or three steers were shot down and those behind piled up. Bob Badger's horse cleared the struggling tangle of horns and hoofs.

And above the din of pounding cloven hoofs, of shots and rattling boulders dislodged from above and crashing down into the canyon there came that wild, profane, mocking war cry of Pablo Rance, the toughest renegade on the Mexican Border. A mixture of the worst blood of white, Indian and Mexican was that swaggering raider who defied both governments and broke every law of God or man.

BOB BADGER saw Jay Fletcher's horse stumble, almost turning over. He saw Jay's lean-jawed, hawk-beaked face, gray with suffering, set in grim lines, while blood trickled from between tightly drawn lips. The jarring of the horse under him was bringing on another coughing spell. There in that dismal gray dawn the dust thickened as the steers charged through the dry bed of the canyon, past barren rocky walls and over scattered patches of manzanita brush to the catclaw and mesquite there on the floor of the canyon that spread out into a dry wash clogged with granite boulders as large as a cabin.

Bob Badger spurred his horse up through the leaders of the steers. Towards Jay Fletcher whose horse had faltered, twisted a foreleg badly, and was making a game battle to keep from going down.

From both sides of the canyon came those bullets that were taking such a deadly toll of cattle and men. Back behind Bob Badger and Jay Fletcher two of the cowboys had been shot out of their saddles. Up yonder where the white puffs of powder smoke showed, Pablo Rance and his renegades were getting what Pablo called target practice—shooting down the steers in the lead to pile up the other critters behind them. And up there, on a lame horse, was Jay Fletcher, rustler leader with a bullet-torn lung and the burning, bloodshot eyes of a man on his way through hell.

Jay Fletcher's horse went down, lurched back on its feet, stumbled just as Bob Badger caught up. Bob dropped his carbine to grab Jay Fletcher from his saddle. Blood was spilling from the grizzled Texan's parted lips. Bob Badger's spurs dug deeper. He swung Jay Fletcher on behind him. The trail boss's crippled horse went down to be trampled to death in a few seconds by the stampeding steers. Then from the slope came the wild, drunken cry of Pablo Rance—a laugh that was like the cry of a hyena.

"Aviso, gringo! Aviso, gringo!"

Swearing through clenched teeth, Bob Badger held Jay Fletcher on behind him. The seconds dragged into minutes before they cleared the canyon, the deadly trap called Buzzard's Pass. They roared on through the wash beyond while the frightened herd spread fanwise out behind them, slacking speed. The race with death was over. . . .

Bob Badger was hatless, his thick

brown hair wet with sweat, fouled with dust. Jay Fletcher had quit coughing. He was limp, shuddering with pain and nausea as Bob pulled up and dismounted, lifting the wounded man to the ground. He jerked off his neckscarf and wiped the blood from the trail boss' mouth.

Jay Fletcher grinned faintly. His face, dirt-covered, blood-smeared, was ashen. His lips were white and his bloodshot eyes were the eyes of a man looking at death. For Jay Fletcher, cattle rustler, the race was done—and he had lost!

"So-long, Bob." Jay Fletcher's voice was a croaking whisper. "Give me your word this is is your last pasear into Mexico after wet cattle. Gimme your word."

"All right, Jay."

"It's a fool's game, Bob. Don't pay."

Bob Badger nodded. Jay Fletcher's stiffening lips moved again, the words coming slowly.

"At the ranch . . . Loose board under the stove . . . Lift it . . . For you and Palomino . . . So-long, Bob."

"Pablo Rance is the man that shot you, Jay. Can you hear me? I'll quit rustlin'. But I'll hang Palbo Rance's hide on the fence."

Jay Fletcher's blood-stained mouth grinned faintly. His glazing eyes brightened for a part of a second. He had heard and understood. Then he was dead. Jay Fletcher, cattle rustler, had fetched his last herd of wet cattle out of old Mexico.

CHAPTER TWO

Jail for a Rustler

FIFTY miles north of the Mexican Border was the Jay Fletcher ranch. Bob Badger reached there at sundown about a week after the fight at Buzzard Pass. But as he came to the edge of the mesa that overlooked the ranch in the dry wash below, he knew that he was too late. Someone had been there before him, probably last night. The cabin, bunkhouse and barn were burned to the ground, Only the cooling gray ashes remained, sending wisps of white smoke into the air. Someone had burned out the place.

Well, it didn't matter any more to Jay. Jay was buried down by the Border, his grave marked by boulders. He had left no wife or family behind to mourn his passing; no kinfolks to bewail the burning of the ranch buildings, such as they had been. Whatever it was that Jay had cached under the floor of the cabin was gone. The board floors were charred ashes. If Jay had hidden money there, it had been stolen, or destroyed in the fire unless it was in gold. But that was not likely, for where the stove had been Bob found a metal box. Its cover had been forced open.

Bob poked around in the ashes for an hour or more, but the search was fruitless. He rode away into the dusk. Some time after dark he rode into the little cow town of Quien Sabe. He put up his horse at the feed barn and walked into the small town's one saloon. A few cowboys were standing at the bar shaking dice for the drinks. They greeted Bob Badger casually, after the manner of their kind.

"Webb Decker in town?" he asked the heavy-paunched saloon man.

"You'll find him back there shavin'." The bartender jerked a thumb towards the rear of the place which boasted living quarters and a couple of card rooms. "He got in about an hour ago. Seemed ringy about somethin'."

Bob Badger bought drinks for the crowd, then quit the bar. He entered the living quarters at the rear of the long adobe building without the formality of rapping on the door.

Inside the room that was a combination kitchen and bunk house a thickly built man was scraping whiskers and lather

from a square-jawed, weather-reddened face. He had a graying crop of rust colored hair and small, suspicious eyes that looked green in the lamplight. He had taken off his shirt and rolled back the sleeves of a heavy wool undershirt. Around his middle was a sagging gunbelt and a .45 in a holster that was fastened to his thick thigh by a leather thong. His overalls were faded, his boots rusty from wear and stained with dried mud. He hadn't taken off his spurs. His brush jumper and chaps were on the floor near the door. A carbine leaned against the wall. He scowled at Bob Badger, not troubling to nod a greeting.

"Expected you and Jay last night. What the hell made you late? Where's Jay?"

"Jay got his down below," Bob said quietly. "We had trouble with Pablo Rance while we were gatherin' the cattle on the Casitas grant. Jay got a bullet in the chest. Then on the way out Pablo's outfit ambushed us in Buzzard Pass. The joltin' finished Jay. Lost a day gettin' Jay planted and the scattered steers gathered."

"How many did you fetch out?"

"We're holdin' 'em at Coyote Well. You can get a count on 'em tomorrow."

BOB hated this heavy-set man he worked for. It was typical of Webb Decker's callous nature that he had no word of sorrow for Jay Fletcher's death. All he cared about were the stolen cattle that had been brought out of Mexico.

"I asked how many head you fetched out. Can't you count?"

"There was five hundred and thirty six head when I tallied 'em this mornin' But they're boogery and the boys might lose some tonight. We left the lower end of the Casitas with better than nine hundred head. Had two bad runs on the way up when the Pablo Rance outfit tried to take 'em away at night. And we spilled mebbyso a hundred head there at Buzzard Pass. Didn't dare take too much time makin' a gatherment. Pablo kept worryin' us and a couple of smart Aleck Border riders was actin' nasty. So I shotgunned the herd on through to Coyote Well. It was the best bet. . . . We lost two cowboys besides Jay."

"If you're roddin' the outfit in Jay's place, you better saddle a fresh horse and git back to the herd," Decker cut in. "And, by God, hold 'em. You've bin down there in Mexico drawin' fancy wages for so long that I won't hardly break even on this bunch of dogies. Throw them steers in on the Honda pasture tomorrow."

"I put Jones in charge when I left," Bob Badger said slowly. "I'm not goin' back. I'm drawin' my time."

Webb Decker's open razor nicked his blunt jaw. He glared at Bob Badger, wiping the bloody lather from his face with a dirty wet towel. His bloodshot eyes glinted.

"Pablo Rance has put the fear of God into you. That why you're quittin' me in a tight?" His voice was harsh, sneering, hot with anger and contempt. Decker had a tough reputation and did his best to live up to it.

"What business I have with Pablo, I'll take care of, personal," Bob came back. "I'm not quittin' in a tight. The agreement Jay and I made with you calls for delivery of the cattle to Coyote Well. The cattle are there, what's left of 'em. If you think I'm quittin' in a tight because I'm scared of that spur jinglin' 'breed, you're entitled to your own opinion. You owe me five hundred dollars. An' I'm collectin' Jay's thousand."

"I'll pay you what I owe you, Badger. Five hundred for a month's work. But you can't claim a dollar of what Jay Fletcher has comin'. Dead men draw

no pay from me. Five hundred is what you got comin'. It's all you'll git from me."

"Jay and I were sort of pardners, Decker. Have been, for ten years, since my daddy was killed and I throwed in with Jay. What one of us had belonged to the other."

"I don't pay dead men." Webb Decker wiped his hands on the dirty towel and took a thick roll of bills from his pocket. The lather was drying on his red face that was half shaved. He counted out five hundred dollars and tossed the money on the table, snapping the thick rubber band around his roll once more.

"Take it or leave it, Badger. It's all you'll get out of me. Jay Fletcher's gittin' killed was just his hard luck."

BOB BADGER picked up five hundred and shoved it into the pocket of his Levis. Then without a word he left the room and went back into the barroom. Refusing the invitation to drink, he quit the saloon. Decker owned the place. It was sort of headquarters for him, and for the cowboys who worked for him gathering Mexican cattle or riding his range on this side. Decker owned the Bottle iron and enough acreage to run ten thousand head. He bought and sold cattle and made most of his money gambling with rustled beef. He was a man who'd hire riders like Jay Fletcher and Bob Badger, paying them good money to risk their lives and freedom and treating them with surly brutality. Decker was a born gambler. He liked to win back the money he payed his cowboys. And those who were foolish enough to drink his whiskey and sit in his poker games usually left town with the pockets of their overalls empty. They were gamblers, too, those men who bet against the devil on their Border raids. Money to them was something to buy whiskey with or to gamble away or to squander on dance hall girls.

The grizzled old Jay had been like that. He had managed to get hold of a small ranch and a few head of horses and cattle. Bob Badger had bought an interest in the little spread there in the foothills below the mountains. Bob wasn't much of a hand to gamble and since his father's death ten years ago in a quarrel that was started by whiskey, he never drank to amount to anything. It was corn whiskey as much as Pablo Rance's gun that had killed Bob's father, Jack Badger. Jack had been a wild one—especially after his wife's death when Bob was about ten years old. Jack Badger had let his son run wild, let him shift for himself, and only for Jay Fletcher the boy might have gone to hell. Even as it was Bob Badger had ridden with rustlers the past few years, when he was old enough to make a tough hand.

Bob Badger missed Jay more than he wanted to admit to himself. He'd always liked that hard-riding, quick-triggered old Texan. He would miss him a lot, now that he was dead.

Bob had a double reason for wanting to kill Pablo Rance now. Pablo had killed his father down in Mexico. And he'd shot Jay through the lungs.

He wondered if it was Pablo who had burned down the ranch that now belonged to Bob. He'd have some Mexicans replace the burned frame buildings with adobe. They were the thing in this Arizona country. If Webb Decker had kicked through with that thousand he owed Jay, he would have used the money for that. But it didn't much matter. He'd get it from Decker, one way or another, sooner or later. Decker couldn't crook him like that.

THEN he put Decker out of his mind and hit the trail for La Mesa where Clara Carr taught school. Now that he

wasn't going to handle wet cattle any longer, she might give him a chance, even if her folks did not approve of him. Her father, Allison Carr, was captain of the Rangers, a tall, white-moustached old Texan who did his best to enforce the laws of the state. Decker and Cap Carr were bitter enemies. Along the Border they expected the two to some day shoot it out. And because Bob Badger had gone to work for Decker he was not exactly welcome at the Carr home, though Allison Carr had no real personal dislike for the young cowboy except that it was a sort of open secret that Bob handled cattle stolen in Mexico. Mrs. Carr, a little, soft-spoken lady, shared her husband's views.

It was past midnight when Bob Badger, riding his private horse, rode into the cow town of La Mesa. He cared for his horse and went to the hotel. From the dining room came the sounds of a stringed orchestra. That accounted for all the saddle-horses and rigs in town. There was a dance going on. Bob was glad he had his best clothes in town. He always kept clean clothes here at the hotel. He needed them.

Captain Allison Carr was the first man he met, there in the crowded hotel lobby. He looked about as disreputable as Bob, with his dust-powdered range clothes, his stubble of white whiskers. His eyes were bloodshot from wind and sun and lack of sleep. They were cold gray, penetrating.

"Howdy, Cap," said Bob.

Allison Carr nodded without smiling. "Just the man I want to see, I reckon. Did you and Jay Fletcher just come up out of Mexico with some cattle for Webb Decker?"

"I come out. Jay stayed. For keeps. I buried him down there last week."

"That so? Hmmmm. You won't need a room here. I got a bunk for you over at the jail."

"What do you mean?"

"You're under arrest, young feller. Cattle rustlin' and murder. Better not run off at the head till you talk to your lawyer. Let's git goin'."

People were watching. As Bob walked away in the Ranger captain's custody he saw Clara standing by the doorway leading into the dining room. There was a scared, hurt look in her smoke-colored eyes. He went outside with Allison Carr. The crowd stared after them. Clara turned and went in to her mother.

Despite the fact that he was a rustler this was the first time he had ever been arrested. True, there had been a gun fight down there in Buzzard Pass, but that was on Mexican soil and nobody ever got arrested either side of the Border for shooting one of Pablo Rance's outlaws. Pablo and his men rode with prices on their heads. That had happened in Mexico. The only law of the United States Bob had broken was crossing the cattle without benefit of legal inspection or paying duty on them, and that was not a very serious charge.

Outside the hotel Allison Carr took Bob's six-shooter. He'd left his carbine with the barn man.

"You're takin' this damned serious, seems to me," grinned Bob, humiliated and angry.

"Killin' Border officers is considered serious business, young feller. One of those two Rangers left a widow and two young 'uns behind him. Yeah, I'm takin' it kind of serious, I reckon."

"You're makin' a big mistake, Cap. You're jailin' the wrong gent. There's something wrong. . . ."

"Somethin' almighty damn' wrong," came the drawled reply, "If I was you I'd do my talkin' through a lawyer."

He locked Bob in the jail, then went back to the hotel. Bob sat alone in the steel barred cell. Jay, his best friend

was dead—and Clara, who had always stood up for him, was sharing her father's belief that he had killed two Rangers.

CHAPTER THREE

Outlaw's Friends

THE jail was of adobe, its walls three feet thick. Save for an occasional drunk or some one in for a minor offence, the jail was usually empty. La Mesa, thanks to Captain Allison Carr's quiet-spoken efficiency, was a peaceful little cow town. Bob tried the bars on the small window. But they were deeply embedded in adobe that was as hard as cement. Besides he had nothing but his hands to work with. The Ranger captain had taken his jackknife. After half an hour of fruitless labor that gained him nothing but a pair of bruised hands, he gave up the attempt.

There was a light out in the corridor but the cell was almost in darkness. Bob was worn out, badly in need of sleep. He pulled off his boots and was getting ready to shed his overalls when some metal thing came sailing through the steel bars of the open window. It landed beside the bunk. Bob picked it up. It was a large key.

He leaped to the window and peered out. There was not a person in sight except for the crowd at the hotel several blocks down the main street.

He pulled on his boots, tried the key in the lock. It worked. Letting himself out was a matter of seconds. He saw his six-shooter in its holster, hanging from a nail. Pocketing the cell key, he buckled on his gun and slipped out of the jail. Five minutes later he was stealthily saddling his horse in the dark end of the long barn. He had slipped in the rear door by way of the feed corral, but he'd have to ride out the front way past the barn man who was sitting in the little office playing cards with some of his cronies. Bob had managed to steal his saddle from the saddle room without being heard. But he wanted his carbine, there in the office.

He had taken off his spurs and left them with his chaps, tied to his saddle. He made no noise as he slipped along in the shadow towards the open door of the office. He had left his horse in its stall, bridled and saddled.

He could hear the clink of a bottle against the rim of a tin cup or dipper. The barn man was talking.

"Cap Carr musta trailed him here. But if Bob Badger is guilty, why in tarnation would he ride here to La Mesa, bold as all get out, put up his horse like he was aimin' to stay a spell, and walk slap-dab into the hotel where the whole town except me was gathered? Walked right up to Cap, you say, bold as brass. Bob ain't that big a fool. His daddy and ol' Jay Fletcher taught that young rooster to be smart. You can't make me believe he's guilty. Nope. Pass the bottle. Cards? Ante there, if you're stayin'. . . . "

"Cap finds two Rangers dead down along the Border," someone else said. "Shot full of holes. And that bunch of wet cattle come up outa Mexico about that time. Cap finds a report at the Ranger camp, made out a couple of days before. They keep a daily report, savvy. This report says, in black and white, that they got certain information tellin' 'em that Jay Fletcher, Bob Badger and some more Webb Decker rustlers is due to be crossin' the Border within twenty-four hours. They're aimin' to stop 'em. That report is two days old. And when Cap finds the two bodies of the Rangers, they've bin dead about twelve hours. And the sign says that the trail herd has passed across the Line. Cap trails 'em to Coyote Well, then hits the trail fer Quien Sabe. Bob Badger has bin there, he learns from the bartender, but don't stay long enough

to even take a few drinks. Decker ain't there. The saloon gent says that Decker is on the prod and had a fallin' out with Bob Badger and that Jay was killed on the way back. He don't have airy idee where Bob has gone. But Decker has paid him off.

"Then the trail leads to the Jay Fletcher ranch. Cap finds the ranch burned to the ground, by Gawd. And he trails Bob Badger here and collars him at the hotel. Bob Badger might not hang but he'll do a long stretch in the pen. Decker's the one that should stretch rope."

"I'd trust Bob Badger a heap fu'ther than I'd trust lots of men," said the stable man.

BOB grinned faintly as he stepped to the open doorway. His gun covered the barn man and three others.

"I want my saddle gun," he said softly. "Then I'll have to ask you all to give me a white man's chance. I could hogtie you and gag you and deal you misery. But I won't. All I want is that saddle gun and half an hour's start. You won't need to see me leave. I'm innocent of what they accuse me of. But my only way of provin' it is to fetch in the guilty men. I sure can't win anything from inside a jail with the odds against me. I'm trustin' you men to give me a fightin' chance. Do I get it?"

"You shore do, Bob," the barn man grinned. "Your saddle gun is there in the rack. We're hard of hearin' and damn nigh blind. Must be the likker. Ain't seen hide ner hair of you. Whose deal is it? And dang your hide, ante. Who's short?"

The card game went on with much argument. Bob got his saddle gun from the rack.

"Half an hour start," he said. "Longer, if possible. I won't forget this favor."

It was as if none of the old rascals heard. Their card game continued, and not a man of them looked up as Bob rode out of the barn, past the door of the office that was closed now. They heard the sound of his passing, perhaps, but none of them spoke. The battered alarm clock on the shelf ticked on.

It was two hours later when the abrupt entrance of Ranger Captain Allison Carr into the smoke laden office interrupted their little penny ante poker game.

"Bob Badger's broke jail!"

"The hell," said the grizzled old barn man. "Just now, Allison?"

"Don't know when. I left him locked up, then went over to the hotel on some business. He couldn't have gotten his horse without you seein' him."

"It was cold so we kep' the door of the office shut."

"His horse and saddle's gone," cried one of Cap Carr's men.

"How the hell could that of happened?" said the stable man.

CHAPTER FOUR

Battle at Night

BOB BADGER rode hard for the Border. Once across the Line he would be safe from pursuit from the Rangers. He didn't want to shoot it out with the father of the girl he loved. He'd hide out in the rough hills, play the game close to his belly, and find out what there was to learn about the killing of the two Rangers.

In his pocket was the key to the jail. Where it had come from, who had tossed it through the barred window to him, he did not know. But he was making a wild guess that sent the blood pounding through his veins. Who else but Palomino would know about an extra key to the jail, a key that was kept hidden somewhere, probably at home? The Carrs lived on a ranch a few miles from town. Pal would know where the key was kept.

Even if it wasn't she who had stolen the key and tossed it through the jail window, still he wanted to think so. Riding with the belief that she had remained loyal would make the long trail to danger far easier to ride. He whistled softly as he headed for the Mexican Border.

He had time now to think. There had been two Rangers there on duty at the Border where Jay and Bob usually crossed their cattle. One of Jay's Border riders had come to meet them with the news. That was the evening before they reached Buzzard Pass. So Jay, wise in the ways of handling wet cattle, had managed to get the wrong information delivered to the Rangers. This man, paid for his information with Ranger money, was to have given the two Rangers the wrong lead, sending them off to a lonely spot to await the herd of wet cattle. Jay and Bob had agreed never to shoot at a Border officer. To out-fox them was part of the game—but to kill them was something altogether different. Yet it looked like Jay's innocent hoax had turned out to be a death trap for the two Rangers. Something had gone almighty wrong.

Save for a twenty-four hour wait, enduring whatever minor discomforts that went with it, those two Rangers should not have suffered. They should have ridden back to their camp alive, cussing Jay Fletcher for fooling them. Instead they had been shot down, and Bob was adding two and two, making the best score he could, and deciding that the treachery lay with the man who had taken the false report of the trail herd to the Rangers. The man who had sent the Rangers to Chino Canyon had tipped off someone that the two law officers would be found there.

Bob knew the man he wanted to see, the man who had taken false news to the Rangers. His real name was hidden behind the obvious alias of John Smith. He was married to a pretty Mexican girl and had a ranch in the mountains a few miles over on the Mexican side of the Border.

The new moon had set and the only light came from the stars. Bob's first inkling of trouble was when he reached the Jay Fletcher place and found the wire gate of the horse pasture opened wide and thrown against the fence. Someone had ridden into the pasture to gather horses and drive them through that gate.

And Bob had no way of telling if the thieves were still there except by studying the tracks at the gate. He peered at the brush patches that were big enough to hide a man and a horse. There was no sound of any kind. Then he stepped off his horse, his six-shooter in his hand. Crouching in the gateway, he fumbled for a match with his left hand, pulled the head of the match across the leg of his chaps. He cupped the match flame in one hand and looked at the ground. Horse tracks going in—none coming out. . . .

A bullet nicked the denim brush jumper, near his shoulder. Bob's hand blotted out the match light as he dropped prone. He shot at the flash of the other man's gun, rolled over as the hidden man returned the fire, then shot again twice at the brush patch that hid the bushwhacker. And in the next second he had flung himself in the saddle and had spurred his horse into the brush that hid the man.

The man's horse jerked away, leaving him afoot, staggering drunkenly. Bob quit his saddle and landed on the man whose shot missed by such a narrow margin that the powder burned Bob's face. Then the man went down in a heap, Bob clubbing at him, sitting on his chest. A few seconds and the man was helpless. He smelled strongly of garlic and chili and tequila. His thick voice begged for mercy. He spoke in the Mexican tongue.

"You work for Pablo Rance?" asked Bob.

"Si, si, señor. Por Dios, show mercy!"

Bob Badger's gun thudded against the Mexican"s head and the thick voice ceased. Bob disarmed the unconscious outlaw and let him lay there in the brush. Then he closed the barb wire gate and fastened it shut with a strand of broken wire.

He paused to listen. He heard indistinct shouting in the distance, at the lower end of the pasture. Swinging back in the saddle, he rode at a run towards the sounds. He was shut in the pasture with the rustlers who were after his horses, shut in with the renegade Pablo Rance and his men. Odds? No time to reckon odds against him now. He was saving his horses. Luck favoring, he'd kill Pablo Rance.

Bob Badger and his horse knew every foot of the pasture, every little ravine, every brush patch, even in the moonless darkness. His spurs tickled the running horse. He shoved cartridges into the empty chambers of his six-shooter.

Then, before he had gone a hundred yards, he was met by a hail of lead. Men were shooting at him, their aim guided by the sound of his coming. From beyond came the sound of snapping barb wire.

Wires twanged as horses hit the fence. A harsh voice was bellowing, cursing and shouting orders in the Mexican tongue, mixed with English.

"Tear down the fence! Pronto! To hell with the gate!"

Then Bob's horse stepped in a badger hole and piled up. Bob's head struck something. He was knocked cold.

IT was some time later when he came to. His head throbbed with pain. There was a dull, buzzing roar in his ears. He felt sick and dizzy. He groped around for his gun and found it.

There was no longer any shouting, any snapping of broken barb wire. Everything was quiet. He got groggily to his feet.

Bob's horse had picked up a bad fall. The animal had wrenched a foreleg and was too lame to travel far.

Bob, walking, leading his crippled horse, soon found the broken gaps in the fence. Pablo and his raiders had gone with their stolen horses.

Bob felt dizzy, defeated, disgusted. Here he was, a hunted outlaw, set afoot. Cap Carr would be coming this way, perhaps, or sending some of his Rangers.

From somewhere, not far away, there sounded the nicker of a horse. Bob's horse gave reply. Bob slipped in behind some brush, holding his gun in a tight grip.

A riderless horse showed dimly. The horse kept stepping on the dragging bridle reins. His head would jerk sideways. Then the animal was alongside Bob's horse. The two were getting acquainted, horse fashion.

Bob had seen that the horse was apparently fit. And a man afoot can't pick the color or qualities of a horse that has four good legs. He slipped the saddle and bridle from his own horse and took his carbine from its saddle boot. Then risking a shot from the owner of the riderless horse, he climbed aboard, leaving his own saddle and bridle in the brush.

The stirrups of the saddle were a trifle short. It was not a Mexican rig. There was breeching and breast strap attached to the saddle. There was no gun in the saddle scabbard. Bob shoved his carbine into the leather.

There were streaks of red across the gray dawn, and in that first light of day Bob discovered that he was riding Webb Decker's top horse. That meant that Decker had been here at the Fletcher ranch that night; and to Bob it proved that Decker was in with Pablo Rance. That was the only possible answer to Decker's being here.

It all came to Bob as he rode Decker's horse through that red-streaked dawn with a posse on his tail and the danger of hell all around him. There had to be some good reason why Decker and Pablo were together here at the ranch. Could it be that they were after Captain Carr? Had it any connection with this trap that he'd run into during the night? Bob did not have the answers. But he was going to find them.

Not far from the broken fence, stretched out behind a boulder, he found Captain Carr, himself, with a bullet hole in his leg and an empty gun in his hand. Captain Allison Carr was the kind of man who liked to play a lone hand. Deep down in his heart he believed in this boy who he had trailed down to the Border so that he could speak to him alone—and then he'd run into this hail of lead.

BOB slid from his horse hardly in time. In the strengthening light of day the renegade crew had sighted him and were closing in. With a Winchester in his hand he hunkered down behind Cap Carr's boulder. He had to make every bullet count if he was to kill the two men slated for death—and to save the life of his friend. Captain Allison Carr happened to be the father of the only girl in the world that Bob Badger had ever loved. He knew that he must die here with the Captain—or live with him. But he could not run out.

It didn't take long—for Bob Badger knew how to shoot. He got Webb Decker in the stomach, saw him spill from his horse, heard him screaming that he did not want to die. He was fishing through Decker's chaps hunting for that something which had been taken from Fletcher's steel box. It would mean a lot to him, he knew, and he kept up the search even while Pablo rode in. Then Pablo's bullet broke his arm just as he got it. It was only a piece of paper with writing on it. The blood trickled down from Bob's arm onto the paper almost blotting out the writing. He wanted to read it then—

Webb Decker's body was not too good a shield. But Bob Badger steadied his gun over the dead man—and his next bullet caught Pablo Rance in the mouth. It shut off the last words that the border renegade would ever speak this side of hell.

"Aviso, Gringo!"

And Pablo Rance was dead, too.

Bob Badger sat up groggily, deciphered the message on that note that Jay Fletcher had left behind him in the ranch house. It was difficult to read through the blood. But Bob made it out.

Friend Bob:

Palomino is my daughter. When her mother died I wanted her to have the right kind of bringing up. I was an outlaw so left the baby on the step of Allison Carr's house. I got no money but I'm leaving you the one thing in this world that money can't buy. Palomino's mother was the woman that Webb Decker mistreated and I stole her from Decker to save her from a lot of unhappiness.

Luck.

Bob pushed the note into his pocket. He didn't say anything about it at first when he and Carr started back to La Mesa. He wanted to think about it first. And he wanted to think about a homecoming that was due. He was clear now. And Pal would be waiting for him.

THE END

COMING!

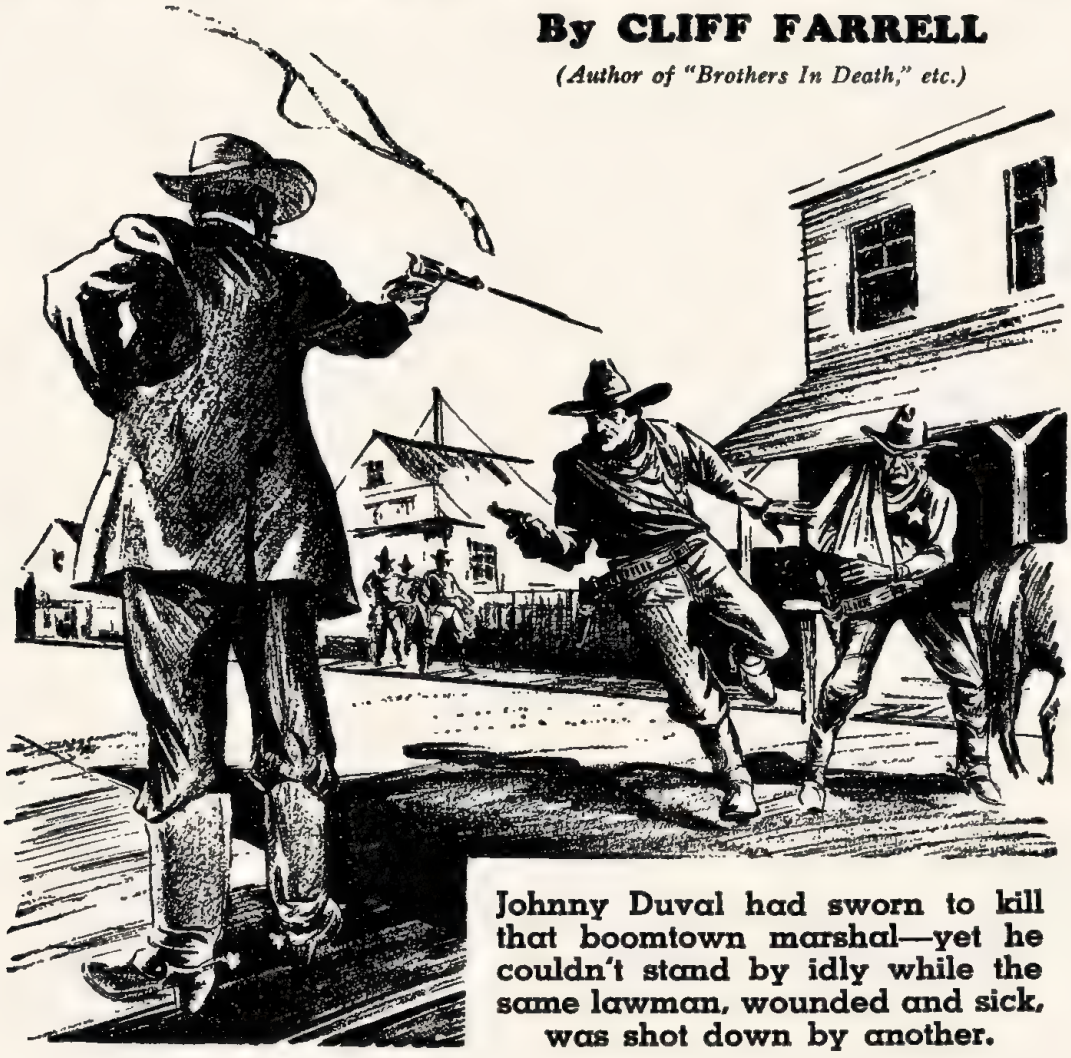
A Great Western Novelette by

OLIVER KING!

GUN-MASTER'S PUPIL

By CLIFF FARRELL

(Author of "Brothers In Death," etc.)



Johnny Duval had sworn to kill that boomtown marshal—yet he couldn't stand by idly while the same lawman, wounded and sick, was shot down by another.

IT WAS a chill, wet day in late October, with the trail season ended, and the town being rapidly emptied of its summer population, when Lew Steep, marshal of Horseshoe, was forced to kill a cowboy.

Lew and his deputy, Pat O'Dell, were sitting around the cannon stove in the jail office. Lew's boots were off, and he drew contentedly on a ragged cigar while he comfortably toasted his socked feet on a chair near the stove. He listened to the soothing patter of rain on the windows.

Lew was relaxed, drowsy, peaceful, like a man at the finish of a hard, nerve-racking job. He had laid off the other two deputies a few days previously. They weren't needed in winter when Horseshoe shrank down to its true proportions. The town was entering a hibernation from which it would awaken only when the longhorns started rolling up the trails from Texas again in the spring.

A swamper from Sam Wrigley's Bar on Front Street, came rushing in, hatless, coatless, his shaggy hair dripping rain.

"Trouble at the Domino, Lew," he panted. "Texicans on the warpath. They've got Sam backed in a corner. They're full of booze, an' they're liable to kill somebody unless you hustle."

"Hell!" Lew said, and reached for his boots. "Where did *they* come from?"

"Driftin' south after deliverin' a government order on the Yellowstone," the swamper explained hurriedly. "You had some trouble with 'em when they went through here in July, Lew."

"I figured I was shut of cowboys for this year," Lew remarked sourly, swinging his gunbelt from a peg, and clamping on his hat. "How many of 'em?"

"Only three—but they're plenty on the prod."

Lew was maybe forty-five, and sometimes looked older. He carried an almost imperceptible halt in one leg, the result of a horse accident in his younger days. He was of medium height. Time was beginning to gnarl him. His shoulders were a trifle bowed. Leathery wrinkles made a webwork on his neck. His sandy hair was thinning. He had a pinched, deprecating expression, and his eyes were a pale blue without depth.

In appearance Lew did not stand out from the crowd. Yet Lew Steep's name was known from Border to Border, and more than one trail outfit had tried to gain fame by attempting to run him up a tree. But no chuckwagon had yet returned to Texas with the name of Horseshoe painted on its canvas.

Water swashed between the duckboards as he and Pat O'Dell hurried down Santa Fe Street, and turned into Front. The majority of windows on these two principal business streets were boarded up and cheerless now. The bulk of the gamblers, girls, and cattle buyers were gone, most of them to Kansas City and St. Louis, a few deep into Texas where the blizzards would not howl. The rain slatted through the empty shipping pens across the track.

Sam Wrigley's Domino, built of logs that had been freighted a hundred miles in the buffalo days, was still open. The two lawmen heard a yell, and crashing glassware when they were still half a block away.

"You go around to the back, an' grab 'em if they come out that way," Lew told O'Dell.

Lew went in the front door alone. A tall, angular Texas puncher, wall-eyed from liquor, was sweeping glasses from the buffet with a gun muzzle.

Another Texan shot a hole in a whisky barrel just as Lew entered. A stream of liquor spurted and spread on the floor.

A third was at the rear, holding Sam Wrigley and two more citizens cowed at the point of a forty-five that wavered drunkenly.

It was this third man that made the task awkward. Lew could see that the cowboy was berserk. The brand of rotgut served in these trail towns had a paralyzing effect on the systems of men who lived without roof or shelter most of their lives.

The chances were that the puncher would pull the trigger on his three prisoners if anything was started prematurely. Sam Wrigley wouldn't be much of a loss to the world, but one of the two citizens was Breck Allen, mayor of Horseshoe, and a real asset to the community.

Lew diverted the play upon himself. "Your fun is over, boys," he said loudly. "Wrap up your hardware."

At the same time he was striding down the long room toward the group at the rear. The Texans turned their heads, bristling at this intruder. Placed as they were the marshal could not keep his eye on all of them at once.

The man who had been wrecking the buffet was off to his right and slightly behind him. Lew saw the faces of Sam

Wrigley and Breck Allen jerk in alarm, and he caught the warning. He leaped aside, whirling.

THE lank Texan behind the bar fired, the bullet grazing the sleeve of Lew's coat. He lined Lew up in the sights for another shot, but in that brief interval Lew's gun came out and spat thunderously. The bullet caught the cowboy squarely in the forehead. He dropped with that inert limpness that only death can cause.

The other two seemed to stiffen and freeze, the madness suddenly evaporating from them.

"Lay them guns on the floor, easy and slow," Lew Steep's voice came harsh and metallic. "Then lift your arms."

They complied. They were staring at their dead pardner, and the expressions on their faces were those of men awaking from a horrible nightmare that they hoped against hope would only prove to be a dream.

Pat O'Dell came charging in the rear door. "Jug these fellas, Pat," Lew ordered. "Disorderly conduct, and destruction of property. An' send Harry Jenkins down here."

Harry Jenkins was the coroner. His findings were brief and perfunctory. It was not necessary to call a jury.

Lew stayed in the Domino for a while after the body had been carried away. He downed a stiff drink.

"Who was he?" he asked.

"Name of Duvall, accordin' to his pardners," Breck Allen answered. "Mack Duvall. Hailed from Tom Green County, Texas."

"I was hopin'—" Lew said musingly. "I was hopin' I could get through the season without downing anybody. I made it this far, clean into October. Then this has to happen."

"It was him or you, Lew," the mayor said. "Nobody can blame you."

"He'll likely have friends, or a brother or two who won't think that way," Lew remarked. "They all do."

"Forget it," Breck Allen exhorted. "Have a drink. Skid that bottle thisaway, Sam."

"I'm quittin'," Lew said suddenly.

"Hell," the mayor exclaimed. "I didn't think you'd let a thing like this get under your hide after—well, after what you've gone through in the past."

"You mean after all I've killed before," the marshal said with some bitterness. "Six men. I've killed that many, though to hear 'em talk you'd think it was a hundred."

"There wasn't a one of 'em that didn't have it comin'," the mayor asserted stoutly. "And you let off some that ought to have got it. Drink up, Lew."

"I'm quittin'," Lew stated positively. "I'm pullin' out of Horseshoe. Got the urge to ramble."

And Lew Steep went. The man who had maintained law and order for three seasons in this roaring trail town, pulled out the next day with a saddle horse and a pack animal.

LEW headed south. He crossed The Nations and went deep into Texas, stopping here and there at towns he had known in the past, renewing old acquaintances. He foreclosed on the standing invitation of a rancher below the Nueces, where he loafed for weeks, hunting wild turkey, peccaries and deer in the *brasada* thickets.

In January he swung west, and one February night he pulled into El Paso. There he met more men who knew him. Some were from Horseshoe, and a few of them were preparing to head back to it for the coming trail season.

He ran into Ruby Jack Vogel, a gam-

bler from Horseshoe, who was dealing faro in an El Paso house for the winter. Ruby Jack held no great love for Lew.

"Big Ben Allison is back in Horseshoe, Steep," Ruby Jack remarked with a veiled smirk. "We just got the news a few days ago. You must have had advance information, huh?"

"Yeah?" Lew said easily. "Yuh don't say."

Later he was talking to a wealthy cowman from the Double Mountain fork of the Brazos who would soon be putting a dozen herds on the trail. "Howdy, Lew," was the greeting. "Say, I hear Big Ben Allison is out of the calaboose, and back at his old stand in Horseshoe. I reckon you got out at the right time. You carried the pack long enough in that town. Allison holds a grudge against you, so they say."

"I reckon," Lew remarked. "I sent him to the pen for robbin' a drunken cowman a couple years ago.

And another: "Big Ben Allison is plenty sudden with a gun—and mean. Don't blame you for duckin' him, Lew. Good luck to you wherever you go."

"I was figurin' on hittin' for California," Lew observed. "I hear there's a town named Angels or something like that out there that's gettin' right lively. They say it never snows there."

And still another. "Big Ben Allison has been makin' his talk that he'd get you the first time he bumped into you, Lew. But he's got a long way to travel to find yuh now, huh? You're smart at that. A man is a long time dead. Let's have a drink."

LEW stood that for a week. Then he pulled out of El Paso. He did not head toward California. He swung back into Texas, then pointed north. He was going back to Horseshoe. He sent a letter ahead from Pecos, asking for the job as marshal again. Mayor Breck Allen's delighted reply was awaiting him at Abilene. It also contained a warning that Big Ben Allison was in Horseshoe.

Lew traveled leisurely, for the season was early, and he knew Big Ben Allison would wait. Trail herds were being gathered. A few already were grazing northward, following the new grass as the season advanced into March. Lew could see that it was to be a big season, maybe the peak trail year of them all. Towns on the line like Horseshoe would fulminate and boil this summer all right.

Lew was going back to kill or be killed. Big Ben Allison, gambler, outlaw, gunman and bad man, had plenty of grudge to work off. Allison would come up smoking on sight. No doubt about that. And Lew's reputation would not worry Big Ben. He had one of his own. Allison was entitled to cut a few notches himself. He had nerve too, and he was tough, merciless and driven by his wild, vindictive heart. The way Lew figured it both of them likely would snuff out. At any rate the first shot would tell the story. If either missed—well his luck was permanently out.

He crossed the Red River at Doane's. He hit rain a couple days later, and when he reached the south bank of the Canadian, that river was on the rise. Lew knew the Canadian, and its vagaries. Unless he crossed now he might be held here a week or more.

He studied the stream awhile, then bundled his clothes on the neck of his horse, and outrigged the pack animal with two short lengths of cottonwood logs to help float the load.

The horses made it to midstream without trouble, but Lew had underestimated the muddy current. He could see that they would never make the sand bar on the north shore he had aimed at. Below

that point were low, brushy marshes. Lew did not like the prospect. The Canadian was notorious for its soft bottom at this season.

He turned the pack horse loose. It proved a better water animal than his saddle mount, and pushed ahead. Lew finally slid entirely into the water, and held to the tail of his horse.

A dead tree came sweeping near, dipping its crooked, leafless limbs grotesquely, and the horse went into sudden panic.

It reared, went under, tried to turn back, and Lew lost his grip on its tail. He was not much good at swimming and only able to stay afloat. The horse swam away from him. It turned again, heading for the north shore, which was the nearest.

The horse and pack animal made the shore, and he saw them flounder through the mud and disappear in the brush. But Lew, swimming awkwardly, was carried farther down.

He was weakening when his feet finally touched mud bottom fifty yards from shore. He worked toward the brush, but his feet sank deep into the oozy bottom.

Then he failed to draw one leg free. He struggled, and swamped deeper. He was in mud to his waist, with only a foot or so of water over it. Every move he made sank him farther into the ooze. He quit struggling. He was caught.

As long as he made no move he did not sink perceptibly. But the Canadian was rising. It wouldn't take long. Two hours perhaps—maybe three—and that would be his end.

There was a cold, clammy sensation in his tough, square body and a sardonic resignation. Lew was thinking of Big Ben Allison, who would be waiting in vain for him to show in Horseshoe. Allison would have plenty to pin his brag to now. Everybody would believe that Lew Steep had gone up a tree.

LEW shouted occasionally. But likely there wasn't a human within miles. Not even an Indian.

The water was to his neck when he thought he heard a faint reply. He twisted around and located a horseman on a cut-bank on the south shore. Mighty relief and hope arose in Lew's grim eyes. But the rider had the river to cross.

The arrival waved and shouted something, then vanished from view. After a time Lew saw him forcing his horse into the chocolate flood half a mile above. Lew anxiously watched the slow course of that black dot as it crawled across the surface. It finally merged with the swampy shore line above. The stranger had made the crossing.

He soon appeared in the plum brush nearby. He was young, bronzed, and his saddle rig and garb marked him as a cowboy. His voice had the soft inflection of south Texas.

"Bogged, huh," he called. "I'll have to try to float down to yuh from above. Cain't reach that far with the lariat."

"If you could maybe hurry a little it might add years to my life," Lew told him with a tight grin.

The Texan disappeared. Lew waited. The water crept to his chin. He could hear crashing in the brush a short distance above. Then a loud splash.

The cowboy had launched a dead log into the river. Stripped to the skin he mounted it, using a limb as a pole to guide it. The log was unwieldy and rolled its rider under a couple of times. But finally he mastered it.

Floating with the current, he navigated the log down upon Lew, who threw an arm over it. It wasn't difficult to free himself from the mud then. Clinging to the log they maneuvered it to shore below, and climbed shivering into the wet brush.

"Thanks," Lew said.

The Texan grinned. "Maybe it was lucky for me too," he declared. "If you hadn't been in a tight maybe I wouldn't have had the nerve to cross today. I'd have been hunkered over there a week, waitin' for wadin' water."

"How's that?" Lew asked.

"Skeered of water," the young puncher admitted. "Cain't swim a stroke. I shore stayed with my horse like a long-lost brother while he was swimmin' it."

Lew judged his rescuer to be twenty three or four. He was gray-eyed, rugged of chin, not too talkative. Lew cottoned to him.

Later, after the puncher had rounded up Lew's horses, they began to dry off a little around a weak, smoking fire.

"Name of Duvall," the Texan said. "Johnny Duvall. I'm headin' north."

Lew looked into the fire a moment. He was thinking of a dead Texas cowboy lying in Domino Bar at Horseshoe. That one had been named Duvall also. Now he could see certain resemblances.

"You can call me Smith," he told the cowboy. "Jack Smith."

Men who chose the name of Smith were nothing new here in The Nations, where outlaws found refuge. Johnny Duvall nodded gravely and talked of the weather.

THEY rode north together, for Johnny had taken a liking to Lew. They found better weather the next day. By unspoken consent they avoided the scattered roadhouses on the cattle trail.

"I'm headin' for Horseshoe," Johnny volunteered one day. "Never been there before. I hear it's hell with a chunk under it in trail season."

"I figure on hittin' Horseshoe too," Lew remarked. "Yeah, it'll be a right noisy place when the herds roll in."

When they camped young Duvall would often wander off alone. Lew, hunting cookfire fuel, came upon him one day in a flat near a creek. Johnny Duvall was practicing the draw. He had a heavy forty-five with a short barrel from which he had filed the front sight. He was whipping it from his holster again and again.

"You're maybe gettin' ready to level somebody?" Lew commented.

Johnny's square, brown face took on sudden bleakness. "Yeah," he admitted. "I am."

After that Johnny did not attempt to conceal his preparations. Tirelessly, even on horseback, he was forever jerking his gun, throwing the hammer on empties.

In camp he tried it with live shells, aiming at trees. He was far from slow, but Lew, who had made a study of gunmanship, could see the flaws.

One day Lew spoke. "You've got your cutter slung too low, Johnny. It's just that much farther to lift. Pull your holster up higher. And don't tighten up on it when you throw the hammer. That pulls your bead high. Always aim for the belly. That stops 'em quick an' hard. Watch!"

Lew drew and fired at a sapling cottonwood. Johnny blinked. He had seen real gun speed and marksmanship.

Lew took him in hand and gave him many other pointers, tutoring him patiently.

Johnny was an apt pupil. Soon he was not so far from Lew in perfection. He was ready to hold his own with most men in a gun fight.

"When you go up against the real thing, take your time, but don't waste it," was Lew's final advice. "Throw your hammer on the up-swing. Don't swing up, then chop down. That's a loss of valuable time, and you're more liable to miss. It's better to sight a moment and be sure your first slug goes home. Then keep warpin' it in until they quit kickin'. Don't forget that men with slugs in their hearts have

pulled the trigger that took better men with them."

"I'll remember," Johnny promised. "I'm plenty in your debt, Jack."

Lew knew that Johnny would remember. The young Texan was cool, had plenty of nerve, and was not likely to get much excited.

As they pushed into Kansas Johnny grew moody and depressed. They were in their last trail camp forty miles south of Horseshoe when he asked the question that had been burning his tongue for a long time. He asked it now because he had come to trust Lew like a father.

"Jack, do you know Lew Steep, marshal in Horseshoe?"

Lew nodded slowly. Johnny's lips tightened, and he put his next question after some thought.

"Friend o' yours?"

Lew smiled a little. "You'd hardly call him that."

Johnny drew a deep breath of profound relief. "I'm glad of that," he said simply. "Lew Steep killed my brother last fall. I didn't get word of it until a month ago. I aim to square things. That's why I'm headin' for Horseshoe. Thought I'd better tell you so you could keep out of it. We better bust up before we hit town tomorrow afternoon."

Lew threw more wood on the fire, stirred it with a stick, and broodingly studied its mystery for a time. "Yeah," he said. "Maybe that would be better, Johnny."

Johnny drew a scrap of paper from his pocket. "I wrote it last night," he said. "It's a note to my folks back in Tom Green County. I'd like for you to mail it if—if I go under."

"I sure will," said Lew.

THEY were only five miles from Horseshoe early the next afternoon, riding the trail that a million cattle had gouged in past years through the timber of a creek bottom, when the thing that Lew had feared, took place.

A rider from town appeared unexpectedly ahead of them. He was Short George Watson, who ran a livery in Horseshoe. He and Lew were old friends, had played countless games of checkers together. There was no avoiding him. Lew halted his horse, and sat there grimly, his body stiffened against the blow.

Short George peered, then came up at a gallop. "If you ain't a sight tuh cure a sick man, Lew," he cried, pumping hands vigorously. "Breck told me you was comin'. But, say! Do yuh know that Big Ben Allison is in town again, an'——"

"Yeah, I know," Lew remarked tersely.

He did not look at Johnny Duvall until after Short George was out of sight, heading southward toward his horse ranch.

Lew's face was impassive as stone, his eyes expressionless, when he finally did turn to face the young Texan.

Johnny Duvall's features were gray beneath his tan, and his eyes stood out like jets of cold, gray light.

"So that's who you are," Johnny rasped, a deadly quiver in his voice. "Lew Steep, Marshal of Horseshoe. Mack Duvall was my brother. Get off your horse, Steep. I'm out to kill you. I swore I would."

Lew sat motionless in the saddle a moment. The droop of his shoulders was more pronounced. His old eyes lifted, and he cast a weary glance around. He could glimpse the prairie, rolling away beyond the last line of creek brush. The sun was on the new grass, the wet, heady smell of spring on the plains came to him. A thousand memories that made up a lifetime, were upon Lew in that instant; memories of the buffalo that had drifted these plains when he was a boy, of war-riding Indians, of cattle and cowboys, of men good and bad. He looked back at

them through the smoke of countless, forgotten campfires.

Then he swung down. He offered no protest, no defense, no explanation, because it was not in his nature to do so. And Johnny Duvall did not read the vast, tired bitterness and regret in his faded blue eyes as he stood there and waited.

Johnny leaped down too, crouched fifty feet away, then drew. His gun was out and the hammer falling on the upswing—as Lew had trained him to do—before he realized that Lew Steep still stood there waiting. Lew had made no move toward his own gun.

Johnny could not stay the falling hammer. He tried to veer the muzzle. The gun thudded a single shot. The report rolled among the trees with shattering echoes.

Lew Steep staggered a little, then kept his feet. His right arm had jerked. Now it drooped limply. Blood seeped down the gray sleeve of his shirt, dribbled from his finger-tips.

Johnny remained there petrified, his lips peeled back from his teeth. "Yuh can't save yourself that way," he grated hoarsely. "Drag your iron. Your left hand is still good. I'll wait. I'll give you an even break. Reach, I tell yuh."

Lew stood there, gray and immobile, merely looking at him in silence. Suddenly Johnny Duvall cursed in a shrill, taut voice. He wheeled, sprang to the saddle, fed steel to his horse and raced away toward Horseshoe as though seeking to escape from gibbering phantoms of conscience.

LEW watched Johnny Duvall until the timber hid his galloping form. There was pain, and wistful longing on Lew's stern lips. In that moment Lew was regretting, for the first time in his life, that he had never married. He was wishing he might have had a son like Johnny Duvall.

After a time he dragged his war sack from the saddle, doctored and bandaged his arm as best he could. The bullet had broken the bone in his right forearm. Lew Steep knew that he was through as a crack gunman, through as a fighting marshal.

Still, he mounted and rode on toward Horseshoe. Big Ben Allison would be there waiting, and nobody would ever say that Lew Steep took water from any man.

It was sundown when Lew rode down Santa Fe Street. Horseshoe was awakening from its winter lassitude. Board fronts were gone from the windows of saloons, gambling houses and stores. The smell of fresh paint rode the air. A hack came from the depot where a train had just arrived, and flamboyant percentage girls filled it, their laughter sawing on his nerves.

Lew dismounted at the corner of Santa Fe and Front. His arrival was already known. Men had called to him from the sidewalks. The word was spreading like wildfire. But none approached him—not even Breck Allen.

Then he sensed a sudden hush, and looked up to see Big Ben Allison. Allison had appeared from a bar room a block away. He took immediately to the center of the rutted, wind-dried street. He came on slowly, warily.

Allison was tall, heavy-shouldered, with a bullet head. In spite of his size he had feline quickness and grace. And above all he had steadiness and no fear of death. He was as tough as they came, as venomous in his hatred as a rattler.

Lew stepped away from his horse, and contrived to shift his gun around to the front where he could get at it with his left hand.

Allison saw this move, and in the awkward position of Lew's holster, sensed his

triumph. It glinted in his little, gray eyes.

Then into that narrowing lane between them stepped a new figure—Johnny Duvall. He moved in a hundred feet ahead of Lew—too far for Lew to protest what went on in the next few seconds.

"Steep has a bullet in his gun arm, Allison," Johnny Duvall spoke. "He wouldn't have a chance. I'm takin' up this fight in his place. Draw!"

Big Ben Allison uttered a low growl of surprise and fury. Then he streaked out his gun.

Lew watched Johnny Duvall. The young Texan's draw was smooth, so smooth that its precision concealed its rapidity.

Johnny fired as his muzzle swung up. Lew remembered how he had spent hours training Johnny to do it that way.

Allison had fired too. The detonations merged, the building fronts rolling back the echo with a crash.

Johnny's gun flamed again and again—just as Lew had instructed.

Big Ben Allison fired once more as he fell, but his slug was wild and wide. He died there in the street before anyone reached his side.

Johnny Duvall had not been hit. He turned, his knees suddenly a trifle shaky from the reaction. He looked at Lew, but said nothing.

Lew smiled. "Our job is finished here, son," he said. "If anybody tries to give you a job as marshal don't listen to 'em. Nothing in life is worth some of the things you are forced to do when you wear a badge. Let's head south, Johnny."

"Nothin' would suit me better, Lew," Johnny Duvall agreed.

COMING!

Three

Big Western Novelettes

By

HARRY F. OLMSTED

ART LAWSON

JAMES P. OLSEN

★

IN THE JANUARY ISSUE

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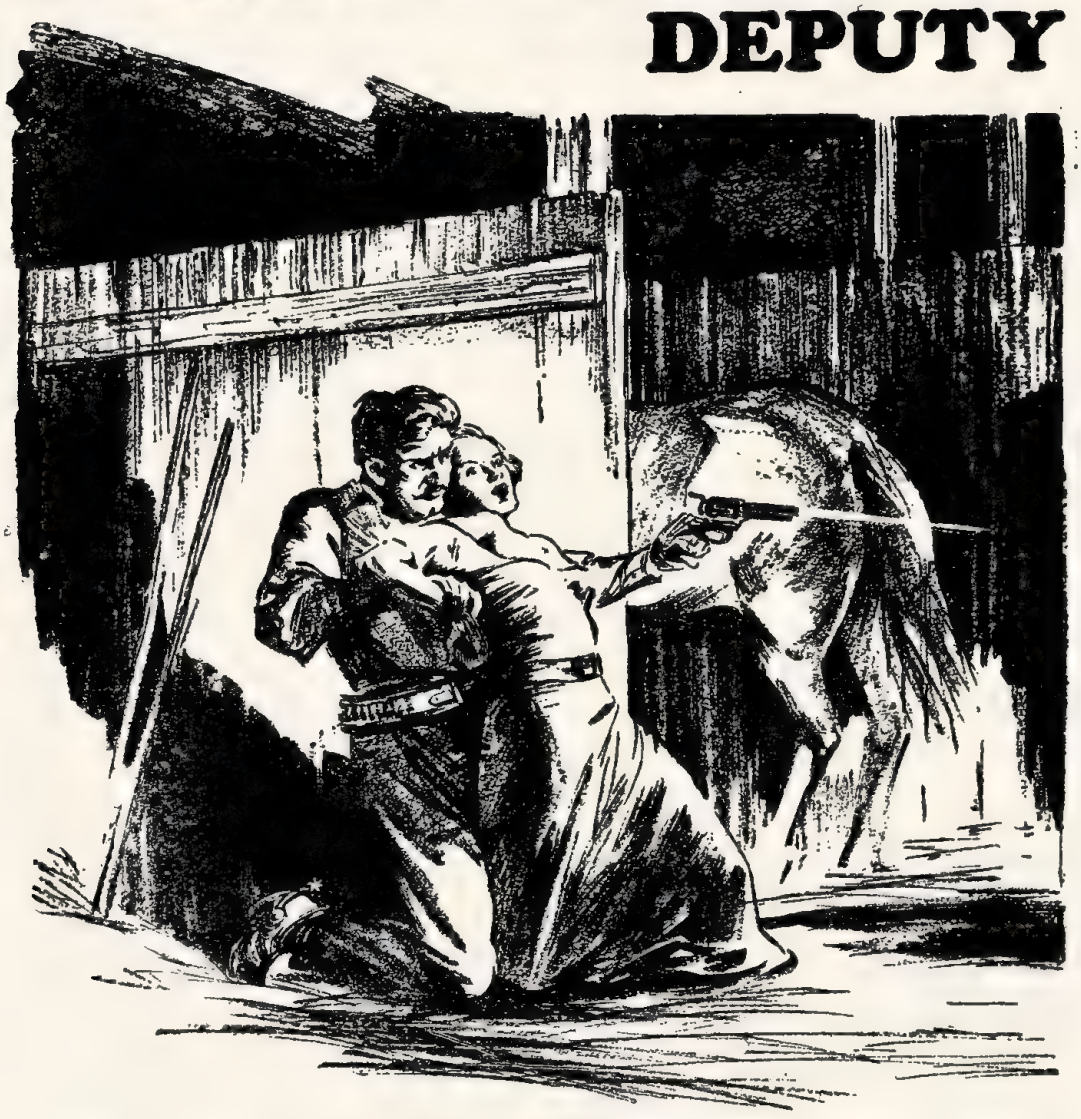
DAMNED MAN'S DEPUTY



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"Jest in time," laughed another, "to see Ol' Lang wallopped by Catron Burke!"

Duane Carson shook the travel kinks

DAMNED MAN'S DEPUTY

A Novelette of Boomtown Law

By HARRY F. OLMSTED
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Duane Carson shook the travel kinks from his long legs. It was election day and already Duane could sense the drama of a throng waiting to acclaim a new idol. Vainly, he searched the crowd for the seamed and rugged face of his foster father; then he elbowed through the crush toward the sheriff's office. As he moved along he could hear openly spoken slurs against Old Lang that made his blood boil. He tried to tell himself that such comments were no more than election bitterness. But he could not do so convincingly. It was plain that Bravo County would be glad to see Lang go—and that hurt Duane. . . .

Old Lang had brought the first law to Bravo County, nearly twenty years before. Honest, tireless, courageous, scorning the weakness of the opposition, he had battled the town into peacefulness. But now—here was the rising voice of an aroused populace that honed to toss Old Lang into the discard. But why this ugly tone?

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Puzzled, deeply stirred, Duane turned across the dusty street. Ahead of him he saw a slim, Levi-clad figure dart through the open door of the sheriff's office. Duane paused, an admiring smile softening his face.

"Gay Woodford!" he murmured. "Grown up into a—a lady."

Instinctively he moved closer through the gathering darkness. Gay's laughing words came clearly to him.

"Just voted the Flying W hands, Uncle Lang. Ten good votes for you. Costly ones."

"Costly, Dumplin'?" came Old Lang's inquiring rumble. "Howcome?"

"Each one cost me a kiss," laughed the girl. "Yes, and I nearly didn't get to vote them."

"How's that, Dumplin'?"

"Dad had another bunch of horses run off last night. The boys took the trail but lost sign at the Rio. They got back just in time."

"Hrrumph!" Old Lang cleared his throat angrily. "Doggone them rustlers! Why don't yore paw call me in on some uh these thievin's he's tellin' the range about? Was a time when Mort Woodford an' me was good friends."

Duane saw the girl hang her head sorrowfully. "He's listing to talk, Uncle Lang and losing confidence. Says Bravo County's only hope is to elect a—a more active man—like Catron Burke, of Sierra Prieta. But I voted his hands . . . . and missed the incoming stage doing it."

"Holy grief!" bawled the old sheriff, jumping up. "The stage! An' the boy comin' in on it. . . ."

Duane didn't hesitate. With a bound he was inside, leaping at Old Lang.

"Dad!"

"Duane, boy. . .!"

They crashed together, whirling, pummeling one another. Then, when they had paused in their demonstration, Lang indicated Gay Woodford.

"You recall Gay, son?"

But Duane was already grinning at her. How often, during the last four years, had he harked back to his quarrelsome days with this fiery little sorrel top. But all that time he had been thinking of her as a little girl and, now, he was quite unprepared for the striking change in her.

"Gay!" he smiled, taking her proffered hand. "You've grown up! You're—you're lovely."

"Flatterer!" The sparkle in her eyes matched his. "So you've come back to awe us cowfolks with your fine ways?"

Old Lang eased the strain of the silence that fell between them. "Four years uh school ain't took nothin' out of yuh noticeable, Duane," he murmured, critically. "But I don't take nothin' sight unseen. Time'll tell. You wrote you'd tell me why you was comin' home when you arrived. How-come? Did them he-schoolma'ams at the college at Dallas cut you into the canners?"

Duane's smile faded as he dropped Gay's hand to face the man who had picked him up as a drifting range orphan, who had given him a home and a chance.

"Now that you mention it," he grinned, affectionately, "I'll tell it straight. I quit school!"

"Quit?" cried Old Lang. "Whatever in hell fer?"

"It's been nearly three years since I quit," confessed the youngster. "I've let you send me money I didn't need. Every cent, an' more too, is safe in the bank. Twenty-five hundred dollars an' better. . . ."

The sheriff's face grew dark. "You damn ungrateful pup!" he barked. "I've—"

"I'll be going, Uncle Lang," broke in Gay Woodford. "I've a long way to ride."

"So long, Dumplin'," called Old Lang, gruffly. "Thanks fer the votes."

The girl turned to Duane. "We'd be happy to see you at the Flying W, Mister Carson," she said, with forced formality, "if you can put up with . . . .with beef."

Duane chuckled. "I'd even eat beef, Dumplin'," he hoorawed her, "just to take up our quarrelin' where we left off."

SHE was laughing as she darted out the door. Duane was staring moodily after her when Lang Lorison braced him. "Now how about this quittin' school, feler?" he barked.

"It took less than a year to find I was wasting your money," confessed Duane. "They couldn't teach me what I wanted."

"Such as what?"

"Sheriffin'," smiled the youngster. "I wanted to learn manhuntin' so's I might be of help to you here. So I landed a job with the Dallas sheriff. I've made good money and I've learned a lot. But when I learned that they were riding you here, I quit and came home."

Old Lang's eyes sparkled, then clouded. "I'm sorry you done that, son. 'Cause it looks like I ain't got nothin' tuh offer yuh. . . ."

He cut off as the door opened to admit a tall, commanding presence. Toles Jarrett, owner of the Lone Star Saloon and mixed up in half the business of Bravo County, was handsome, darkly tanned. A black spike mustache topped his scornful smile. He moved swiftly, with the sly grace of a cat. His clothes were flashy, his leather richly tooled; his spurs dragged noisily and a pearl-gripped six-shooter slapped his thigh. He grinned at Duane, then planted himself before Lang.

"Lorison," he chuckled, then fell silent as he looked the old sheriff up and down.

"Hullo, Toles," greeted the sheriff, scowlingly. "It's over, eh? An' the votes counted? Out with it! How bad did Burke beat me?"

The saloonman lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply. "It was close, Lang," he murmured. "Closer'n I figgered it to be. Catron Burke sure bought plenty votes."

"I had no money tuh spend," said Old Lang, bitterly. "I ain't surprised. Well—" his eyes ran hungrily around. "I'll move out come mornin'. It had tuh come."

"Sometime," acknowledged Toles Jarrett, "but not yet awhile. I spent the money for you, Lang. Three-four thousand dollars of it. An' Toles Jarrett don't lose many gambles as—" his lips twisted with cruel emphasis—"as you've probably noticed. I've put you over for a sixth term, Lang! By twenty-two measly votes!"

"What?" Old Lang bounced up, staring.

"You heard me, Lang. Congratulations!"

"Thanks!" Old Lang tightened up as he stared incredulously, then slumped as the reaction came. "I don't see how yuh done it, Toles," he said, wearily. "In a way I orta be glad, I suppose. But right now I feel—feel downright sorry."

The saloonman's eyes narrowed to pinpoints. "You're not gettin' soft, Lang? You'll not let us down after—after spendin' all that money on yuh?"

For a long minute their eyes locked, Lang's blazing, his lips moving soundlessly as unvoiced words stuck in his throat. Then something seemed to go out of him. He nodded dumly.

"I'll go plumb through, Toles. All the way. On one condition."

"What's that?"

"That I can make Duane, my boy, first deppity."

Toles Jarrett turned quickly to regard the youngster. His face broke into a smile, he stuck out his hand. "Duane Carson," he cried. "I've heard Lang talk about

you plenty. Mighty glad to shake your hand." He turned to Lang. "Why not, old timer? I think it's a great idea if—if you can keep him in hand." He hesitated, a wild light flaming in his eyes. "Yeah—a fine idea, Lang. It'll make it easier for you to answer the bloody shirts of Bravo County!

Abruptly, he left the office. Lang Lorison stood there, his face unspeakably bleak. "Fine idea," he murmured, with bitterness. "I wonder if it is."

And upon his part, Duane wondered what the bitter thoughts were that were mirrored so painfully on the old sheriff's face.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dude's Gun Test

TWO weeks had passed and the repercussions of the election were stilled. Whether they liked Lang Lorison or whether they didn't, Bravo County folks had accepted the will of the majority, slender as it had been. But there was no enthusiasm in the perennial sheriff. He spent most of his time in the jailhouse, his nose buried in what he called "inside business."

Duane, taking his new job seriously, spent the time well, sifting about the town, renewing acquaintancies and keeping a weather eye on the temper of those who made the town their rendezvous. He found himself deeply stirred by the strange alchemy that four short years had worked in men's opinions of Old Lang Lorison—and in the old man himself.

Duane couldn't understand the unwonted lethargy that seemed to be dragging Old Lang down. Gone was the bluff, hale-fellow-well-met manner that had once been his. Gone was his cheery smile, replaced by a haunting broodiness. And just as the better element of Tassajera and Bravo County were against him, the saloon and redlight crowd were openly for him. But to Duane, who worshipped the sheriff as father, benefactor, friend, neither of those causes would be anything more than passing political whims, the echoes of the bitter campaign so lately terminated by Lang's election.

The answer, something quite intangible, worried the young deputy, kept him busy trying to ferret it out so that he could help Old Lang. But that answer was not destined to come that way.

One morning, Duane found the sheriff buckling on his guns. His mouth was a grim, hard line; his eyes pools of hopelessness. With something akin to desperation, the sheriff caught the younger man by the arms, peered into his eyes.

"Duane," he murmured, his voice trembling. "I've gotta ride tuh take. I may be gone a day or a week; I mayn't come back at all. I'm leavin' the office in good hands. I won't worry none about yore takin' care uh whatever comes up. But I'm gonna be almighty uneasy regardin' yore caution. Don't walk in where devils fear tuh track their hoofs. If it's too tough, back off an' let it sorta die down. Yo're—yo're all I got, kid. If I'd lose you. . . ."

Duane gasped. Was this the brave figure of the law that had established the might of civil administration in Bravo County? It hardly seemed possible. This was the voice of fear talking. Truly the last four years had taken more out of Lang Lorison than even his most vigorous traducers were saying. Pity for the old man swept Duane in an emotional wave. He twisted uneasily, swallowed an aching lump in his throat.

"When you going to quit worrying about me, dad?" he asked, forcing a grin. "You go where you're going and leave this end to me, unless—unless I could do you any good by going with you. Shorty Bames can handle the office while—"

"You'll handle this end," Old Lang clipped him off. "Mine is a one man job an' I'll tackle it alone. Good bye, kid, an' good luck."

THEY shook hands and, with mixed emotion, Duane watched the sheriff out of town. The oldster, no longer like the dashing lawman Duane remembered, rode slumped back against his cantle, hands resting on the horn, his face turned downward. He was the picture of dispirted dejection; and for a long time after the dust of his going had swallowed him up, his young deputy sat in the office staring after him, his brow furrowed with thought.

A shrill rebel yell sailing exultantly over Tassajera roused Duane Carson from his unhappy revery. He stood up, hearkening to the vague murmur of confusion from the street that swelled to a roaring chaos as shot after shot crashed somewhere in the town, the echoes dimmed by the muffling effect of four walls.

Duane stiffened, pulled his gun around to a position handy to swift drawing, reached for his hat and stepped to the door. There he almost collided with two men. One was Toles Jarrett. The other was Harley Smith, rotund mayor of Tassajera.

"Where's Lang?" barked the mayor, breathlessly.

"Gone!" snapped Duane. "He rode out an hour ago—on business."

"He would," snarled the saloonman, acridly. "Never in town when a man needs him."

"What's the matter?" asked Duane.

"Matter enough," barked Jarrett. "It's a mess. Two-gun Platner is in the Lone Star, shootin' it up. Threatens to tree the town. He's roaring drunk an' plumb on the mean. What you going to do about it, Mister Deputy?"

"Jail him!" murmured Duane, casually. "Or kill him!"

They stared at him, surprised. Then Toles Jarrett was mouthing his suave smile.

"That's the stuff, kid," he said, very softly. "I told the mayor not to trust his marshal to this job, that you had what it takes to handle Two-gun. Go get him, an' if you need help—"

But Duane Carson wasn't listening. Stepping around them, his eyes focused coldly down the street, he was moving toward the Lone Star Saloon, from which frightened townsmen were speeding with fearful backward looks. From the door of the drinking emporium broke a glowering brute of a man with two smoking guns held, one in each hand. Two-gun Platner was obligingly waiting for the town to tree itself. His guns spewed an occasional shot into some hapless window. His face was flushed with liquor and excitement as bawled profanity issued challengingly from his throat.

Two-gun was bad. Everyone in Bravo County knew that. Rumor had it that he was connected with half of the lawlessness that transpired when the tawny moon rode high. If that was true, it marked him a sly and prudent man. For in some way he avoided arrest for his playfulness and kept his trail free of those lone scourges of lawlessness—the Rangers.

PLATNER seemed to settle as his bloodshot eyes fell upon the young badge-toter who walked so deliberately toward him. He barked a raucus run-order, sent a bullet within inches of Duane's legs. But the youngster's nerve was good. He never faltered in his stride. His fingers swung free of his gun. He made no false moves. To have done so would have meant death, he reasoned. Might anyway, for Two-Gun's pistol magic was something of a legend.

The desperado had fallen sullenly silent as Duane got within fifty yards of him. But that fact added nothing to the young deputy's confidence. The man was crouched, snarling, lethally ready, a fearsome object of animal savagery. But it was something else that gave the youngster momentary pause. Down the street, far beyond the desperado, came two riders. One was Old Lang Lorison. Beside him rode another oldster, equally grizzled, equally morose of face.

Sight of Lang slowed Duane's advance, then speeded it. From what the kid had seen, he knew the sheriff wasn't up to mixing in an affair of this kind. Age had laid too heavy a hand on the old man's shoulder. It would have to be finished before. . . .

"Platner!" Duane's voice rang like a clarion through a town gone suddenly as still as death.

"Stop comin', tin-star!" barked the desperado, lining his two guns steadily. "Yòu whoa up, feller, or I'll blow a hole in yore entrails they kin wheel a cattle car into."

The deputy didn't even hesitate. "You're under arrest, Platner! Drop those guns and pitch up your hands!"

"I'll drill you shore if you keep comin', feller!"

Duane's voice was deceptively soft. "It's strictly up to you, Platner. But make up your mind. What'll it be, sleeping it off in the jailhouse or getting drowsy—permanent?"

The desperado gave way, his guns just a little less steady. He was used to men running from him, or sniping at him from hidden coverts. But this coldly fearless advance struck a chord of fear on the taut wires of his nerves.

"Hold on . . . . you!" he blustered. "You ain't got sense enough tuh be scairt. What in the hell do you want I should do?"

"Drop those irons, Platner!" came the crisp answer, "or make your play."

Two-gun wavered, staring stupidly at the deputy, who still inched toward him. "What—what you gonna do with me?" he asked.

"Jail you, Platner!" the soft, sure answer came.

The desperado's lips twisted in a sly grin. He shifted his heavy shoulders and let a mirthless laugh dribble from his lips. He loosed his guns, dropped them to the boardwalk.

"You win, feller," he said, with a touch of admiration in his tone. "Pick up the marbles."

TASSAJERA watched in amazement as Duane walked Two-gun down the street and into the jail. Clearly to the young deputy's ears came the murmur of their returning courage, their growled threats to lynch the gun-crazy trouble maker. But Duane paid it no heed. His first lesson in this grim business had been that crowds are always that way. They'll swap fear for mob courage and back again. Yet their force is meaningless until caught up in the swirl of dominant leadership.

When Duane came out of the cell block, after jailing Two-gun Platner, it was to face Old Lang Lorison and the grizzled stranger with whom he had ridden back to Tassajera. Duane found plenty interesting in the piercing gray eyes of that stranger, in the strong cut of his seamed face, in the carriage of his whang-leather body. But mostly his eyes were for the conflict in Old Lang's eyes. The sheriff was first to speak.

"Son," he said, softly, "I met Ranger Captain Hawk Blackman down the line a ways an' decided my business can wait. Cap'n, shake hands with Duane Carson, the boy I've raised up from a button."

The ranger's smile was genuine as he

took Duane's hand. "I'm proud tuh meet yuh, Duane," he said, sincerely. "Or any lawman that done what you just done under the gun. Yes sir. You was shore strokin' the hubs uh hell the wrong way out yonder as me an' Lang came shovin' into town. You're cut the right way of the leather. You've got ranger blood in you. How'd you like to ride law-gun for Texas?"

Duane flushed with conscious pride, grinned his embarrassment as he shook his head decisively. "I'd be an awful liar, Captain," he said softly, "if I said I wouldn't. But I can't think of it now. I've just come from Dallas to help out my dad tame Bravo County. For right now that'll keep me busy, I reckon."

From the corner of his eye, Duane saw Old Lang flush and register pain. A slow smile grew on the Ranger's face.

"More credit to you, son," he said. "An' right in line with what I seen you do out yonder. Well, when yo're ready, let me know. I'm allus on the hunt fer men with ranger blood runnin' in their veins." He turned soberly to Old Lang. "But I got to get down to my business here. Sheriff," he said, pulling an official looking paper from his pocket. "This is an order from the Adjutant General to remove you from office. An order resultin' from repeated complaints from certain big cattle interests in Bravo County an' subject entirely to my judgment of the merits of the complaints. My judgment now is that you've got here the machinery to enforce the law an', if my eyes ain't gone plumb bad, the will to do it. Am I right?"

"Dead right!" clipped Duane.

"A man in politics is bound tuh have enemies, Captain," murmured Old Lang, uneasily. "I ain't done so bad here."

"Four reported raid killin's in a month ain't exactly healthy, Sheriff. Not to mention the unhampered raidin' of this Bravo Kid. . . ."

"A *hombre* slick as eels in bull taller," complained Old Lang. "I'm figgerin' now on combin' the Quitman Hills fer him."

"Not necessary now, Lorison," answered the Ranger. "I'm putting a camp of Rangers over there on the Rio. But I'm puttin' it up to you to clean yore house. I'll hold up this order in the meantime. I don't mind tellin' you I leave yore town feelin' better'n I thought I would. I bid you both good day. An' don't forget, kid, that I can use you whenever you need a change. . . ."

Cap Blackman turned his eyes upon the old sheriff and Duane saw the challenge leap into Old Lang's face. Then, with a murmured "so long," the Ranger was outside, striding toward his horse. From the window, Duane watched him ride out of town. He felt a surge of admiration at the erect, almost regal way the man sat his high-horn saddle—straight as an arrowweed and cloaked with the majesty of Ranger law. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Lynch for a Lawman

AS Duane Carson walked to the jail to feed his prisoner the following morning, he was inspired by a very materially bolstered authority. Facing down the rampant Two-gun and the subsequent compliments of the brusque old Ranger Captain had imbued him with a feeling that he must assume the whip hand in the enforcement of Bravo law, and that he could handle it. Old Lang had patiently slid a long ways past the point of being up to his job.

The kid was whistling as he opened the cell block, calling in a gay greeting to the lone prisoner. No answering hail came through the bars and for a long moment Duane stood at the steel door, staring into the cell that had held Two-gun,

and which was empty now. The door had been opened with a key—and only Duane and the sheriff had keys to the cell block.

Old Lang had turned the prisoner loose!

Dazed, Duane closed the jail door, passed out into the fresh morning air. In him was a mighty distaste for the job of asking the sheriff why. . . . But he had risked his life to put the desperado behind bars, to lift Tassajera law out of the slough into which Old Lang had allowed it to slip. Yes, and to so impress Cap Blackman enough to influence him to hold in abeyance an official order to oust Old Lang from office. Surely, the least the sheriff owed him was an explanation.

Hurt and chagrined, Duane met the sheriff on the way to his office.

"Dad!" he asked, feverishly. "Where's Two-gun Platner?"

Old Lang bent a stern glance upon him. "What are you talkin' about, son?"

"Two-gun is gone! The cell's empty! Where is he?"

"How should I know?" countered the old lawman. "He's yore prisoner. I was leavin' him to you."

"You didn't let him out?"

"Me?" Old Lang swelled indignantly. "What's the matter with you? Don't take yourself so seriously. Did he dig out through the adobe wall? How about the bars at the window?"

"Not a thing out of the way, Dad. How else. . . .?"

"You must have left the door ajar, son. You was excited. . . ."

"I didn't. I locked it up tight."

"Well—" the sheriff patted Duane's arm solicitously. "What's the odds. Two-gun was drunk. He's likely sober now an' none at all ranicky. Forget him."

Duane's face hardened. "Don't you see, Dad, that's the kind of thing that's got you in bad. That's what Hawk Blackman meant he'd be watching from now on. Two-gun has gotta be brought back an' punished for his gun spree. That's the only way we can teach his kind that there's real law in Bravo County from here out. I'm riding to cut his sign!"

He whirled on his heel, started across the street. The sheriff barked after him, drawing the stares of such townsmen as were about.

"Duane! Come back here you young fool! You go on back to the office an' leave this to me!"

Duane paid him no heed, hurried his steps toward the corral for a horse. And Old Lang, stared after him, his face bleak as a winter sky as he cast nervous glances toward the untenanted front of the Lone Star Saloon. Then, stroking his chin thoughtfully, he continued toward the sheriff's office—and age seemed suddenly to have bent him beneath its touch. . . .

DUANE CARSON was lifting his saddle onto his pony when the stable attendant came running in from the front.

"Quick, feller!" he gasped. "Jerk them latigos an' make a run fer it! Out the back way!"

Duane turned to stare at him, vaguely conscious of a growing murmur coming from the street.

"A mob's formin'!" snapped the excited man. "They've heard that you let Two-gun Platner outa jail without a trial. They're ugly an'—"

Duane's jaw jutted and his eyes blazed. "That's a lie!" he said, stiffly. "I put Two-gun in jail; someone else let him out. I've done nothin' to run from."

"They're talkin' a hemp neckpiece!" cried the stableman. "Time enough tuh auger with 'em when they've cooled off. Git outa this an' when you come back you kin—"

"I'm not running!" broke in Duane, evenly, and hung the saddle back on the rack. "I'm—"

Before he could speak his mind, there

was a rush of pounding boots, the hoarse cries of men. Like a tide, they poured into the stable, their faces flushed, eyes flashing and hands holding guns.

"There's the skunk!" cried someone.

"String him up!" bellowed another.

Face gone suddenly pale, Duane stepped out to meet them. But his voice was lost in the roar that filled the big barn as they bore him down and stopped his struggles by the irresistible force of numbers. A rope was brought, knotted about his neck. With their prisoner in their midst, the crowd moved noisily to the doorway and out onto the boardwalk, pausing there as Sheriff Lang Lorison came to a stiff stop before them. The old man's face was working with the stress of his conflicting inner emotions. The blood of anger was boiling in his veins and, for the moment, the weak look in his eyes was burned out by the fires of righteous indignation.

"What are yuh aimin' tuh do?" he challenged the mob.

"Hang this rat!" answered a spokesman, "fer lettin' that hellacious Two-gun Platner buy his way outa jail. Any objection?"

"Yes!" muttered Old Lang. "I have. You're fixin' tuh hang a man on a plumb rumor. You don't know who let Two-gun go. You don't even know fer shore he's gone. . . ."

"I heard you talkin' with Carson yonder on the street," charged someone. "Both of you was passin' the buck back to each other. You said you was leavin' Platner to him, which makes him guilty. Le's git on with it, boys."

"Le's make it a double hangin'!" yelped one of the mob. "If we can't git 'em out with a ballot, we kin shore decorate a cottonwood with 'em. H'ist 'em both!"

There was a concerted movement toward the sheriff—a movement that was arrested only as the suavely smiling Toles Jarrett walked over to stand beside the sheriff.

"What's the rip, boys?" he asked, and it was as if he addressed a crying youngster about his grief. "What's all the excitement about?"

The saloonman's face fell into thoughtful repose as he listened to the garbled and hectic recital from the mob. He was still sober as he glanced at Duane, then turned to face the sheriff. Duane saw the eyes of the two men meet, saw some vague message flow between them. Then all the fir was out of Lang Lorison. He had taken a step backward, and a scornful smile was growing on Toles Jarrett's face as he faced the mob again.

"Sho, now, boys!" he chided them. "Where's your sense of humor? Admitting that the kid did let Two-gun loose, that's no hanging offense. Two-gun, at the worst, couldn't have been stuck for more than a ten dollar fine for disturbing the peace. Don't put a scar on your immortal souls by framin' a lynchin'. Turn your man loose with orders to shuck his star an' travel."

His appeal was quieted and sobered the crowd. For a moment they seemed to hold on Duane, the youngster finding his first hope in the situation. Then out of the hazy leadership of the mob came a shrill cry.

"A good idea, gents! Shuck his star an' travel! On a rail with a smear or two uh tar tuh mar his fresh young beauty."

"Tar an' feathers!" someone took up the cry.

"Ride 'im outa town on a rail!"

THE mob stirred into action. Ruthlessly Duane was dragged off the street to the rear of the veterinary's barn where a pot of tar was always kept to treat the horses' strangles. Someone started a fire under the pot. Another fetched a feather pillow. Paddles were whittled from box

pine. The crowd was savagely gleeful as they milled about the warming tar.

Held firmly by two burly townsmen, Duane watched the hectic preparations for his humiliation. He was telling himself that he would wait until they were ready and then make a desperate bid to escape it. Yet he knew as he planned it that the test would end in failure. But it was better to go down and out battling than to be tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. Then he caught sight of Old Lang Lorison who was standing at the edge of the crowd looking on with almost horrified fascination. And beside him Toles Jarrett smiled with scornful nonchalance. And then, somehow, Duane knew. The old sheriff was caught in the steel grip of the saloonman, was only a tool of the evil clique that held Bravo County in its cruel hand.

The sheriff's eyes, roving nervously, locked with those of the boy. For a moment they stared at each other, Duane's eyes flooded with an unvoiced query; Old Lang's with no answer other than a pitiful plea, a prayer that the youngster withhold his due condemnation until—

Then the strong hands that held Duane were dragging him toward the pot of softened tar. And strangely, after all his planning, Duane made no struggle. Even though he closed his eyes against what was coming, he could still see the plea in Old Lang's eyes. He couldn't understand it now. And because he couldn't understand, he did nothing to avert his fate.

They were stripping off his coat, his gun belt, his shirt, his boots. Now the paddles were smearing the sticky blackness over him. Coating his hair, his face, his torso and legs. As in a dream, he was conscious of the struggle to breathe through the gummy mess that almost sealed his lips and nostrils, of the roar of the crowd as the feathers were slappingly applied.

Then he was being lifted astraddle a bar and his feet were being tied. Desperately he clutched the rail. Details of that awful ride became only figments of a nightmare that was to live with him forever—a ghastly incubus of pain and shock, of terrific heat as the black tar drew down the blasting heat rays, of growing weakness and terrible wracking as his strength deserted him.

The ride seemed endless. His senses reeled as his weight gave down upon the bar. Waves of agony reached out to torture him and he knew no more.

WHEN Duane came back to this world, it was to a complete absence of the howling and jeering of the mob. He lay upon the hot ground, slowly cooking in his black shell. Somehow, he clawed tar from his eyes until he could see, and he lurched crazily to his feet. In him was a roaring thrist that seemed to be consuming his blood. Sight of the green bosque at the edge of his restricted horizon sent him reeling toward it in the hope of being able to plunge his burning body into the cool river flow.

Reeling, stumbling, falling! Crawling! Fighting for consciousness! Until his strength was gone and the bosque still lay ahead. Moaning softly, he lay where he had fallen, his will unequal to the task of driving his outraged body further.

Now Duane was aware of the beat of hoofs. Then voices came dimly to him. He shuddered. Was this the mob coming back to take up their torture? Someone was turning him over. . . .

"Sufferin' cripes, gal! Them Tassajera hellions has tarred an' feathered some pore pilgrim!"

"Who is it, Spittin'?"

Duane started at that voice, tried to pry himself out of the black gulf into which

he had slipped. That voice was cooling, soothing, like a balm to the tortured fibre of his being. It was Gay Woodford's voice.

"Wait'll I scrape off some uh this mess," Duane heard Spittin' Bob Bangs, toothless ancient of the Flying W bunkhouse, answer. "I dunno's I kin tell—"

Duane could feel his fingers working at the tar, then he heard Gay's anguished cry, coming as from a long, long way off.

"Spittin', it's—it's Duane. . . .!"

"Duane?"

"Duane Carson, Uncle Long Lorison's boy. Oh, God, how far will those fiends in Tassajera go? Spittin', pick him up and take him to the river line camp. I'll ride home and fetch out clothes and something to scrape that stuff off with."

"Fetch out kerosene!" ordered the old time cowboy, "an' rags. Look under my bunk an' bring the bottle uh bear ile you'll find there. Ever' place this tar comes off, the hide'll come off with it. He's cooked, an' a mighty sick boy if yuh ask me. He may even die, he's laid in the sun so long with this stuff on. . . ."

"I'll send Doc Adams out right away, Spittin'. You get him to shade and water."

Duane heard the beat of hoofs as she mounted and roared away toward Tassajera. He wanted to call out to her not to leave him, but he seemed incapable of word or movement. Now he was conscious of being lifted in strong arms, of pain lancing him like knives. He thought he cried out in protest, then—blackness. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Law Rides Back

A LOT of muddy water went down the Rio before Duane Carson began again to take an interest in things. Details of that jolting ride to the Flying W line camp, of the several visits of the kindly old medico from Tassajera, of the painful operation of ridding him of the tar, all were hopelessly mixed up with dreams and nightmares and with the hallucinations of his delirium.

When he snapped out of it, sunken-eyed and weak, it was to look up into the weathered face of Spittin' Bob Bangs, a veteran cowpuncher who had come here with Mort Woodford years before. Crippled some, stove-up and a joke among the younger and more active riders of the Flying W, he was still the most valuable man on the Woodford payroll. At least he was to Gay, whom he had raised, taught all the tricks of the range and whose abject slave he was.

"Younker," murmured Spittin'. "I'm right down proud tuh see yuh stirrin' around some. Fer most two weeks, it's looked like you was set tuh make a die of it. Now don't you start runnin' off at the head, not until you've drunk a lot uh Gay's soup she's bin sendin' out here."

Duane wouldn't have talked much even without the warning. He was content to lie in his bunk, looking out through the bosque to the broad, placid breast of the Rio Bravo while the days rolled on and he slowly regained his strength. Then when he could trust his legs a little, he would sit in the doorway with Gay while she rubbed some sweet smelling tonic into his close-shaven scalp and he admired the turn of her tanned cheek, the flash of her olive eyes as she colored his future with rosy tints, as she strove to re-establish the confidence lost in his bitter experience.

Then long days followed, trying days in the saddle with Spittin' Bob, his weakened body aching with fatigue and saddle wracking. But it was good to feel a pony between his knees again; good to smell the pungent aroma of the bottomland, to hear

the voice of the range—and to feel the blood pulsing in his veins again.

But Duane was restless. More and more often, his eyes were wont to sweep up the dark line of the bosque. Gay Woodford, alert to the changes in him, noticed it one day and voiced her curiosity.

"What is it, Duane?" she asked, wistfully. "What is there up the river. . . . for you?"

"For me?" he echoed, and failed to mask the bitterness in his tight little laugh. "Nothing, Gay." And he said it honestly.

BUT fate was to change that belief, that night. Gay had gotten supper for Duane and Spittin', then had ridden back to the Flying W. Spittin' Bob rode away toward Tassajera for a glass and a game with old cronies.

For a long time, Duane sat in the cabin doorway, drinking in the fretted moonlight striking through the trees and hearkening to the deafening frog chorus. Then suddenly the frogs were still and an eerie silence fell upon the bosque. The quiet was broken only by the faint beat of a horse's hoofs and the distant jingle of trappings. For a moment the youngster believed he was about to have a visitor. But the hoofbeats grew fainter as they neared the river.

Through the night drifted the plaintive bawling of cattle and, so it seemed to Duane, the thin cries of men. Impelled by something stronger than curiosity, Duane rose, stretched his strengthening muscles, and started to walk toward those sounds. He paused at last in deep gloom, his eyes fixed upon a number of riders who whooped complaining cattle across to the Mexican side, and upon the lone rider who oversaw the activity from the American bank, not fifty yards from Duane. He was interested in that rider. It was Two-gun Platner, the one whose escape had precipitated Duane's shame. Watching him, Duane saw Toles Jarrett ride out of the bosque behind him before even Two-gun was aware of the saloonman's presence. Jarrett's low-toned greeting came clearly to the youngster's ears.

"Hullo, Bravo! I'm late. Damn pony threw a shoe right out of Tassajera. I was afraid I'd miss you."

"Which you shore would," said the renegade, "if you'd bin ten minutes later. What's on yore chest?"

The saloonman lit down, hunkered as he rolled and lighted a cigarette. The renegade got off to squat beside him. The rumble of their voices came clearly to Duane, who stood stunned in the knowledge that rowdy Two-gun Platner was the notorious Bravo Kid.

"Bravo," answered Toles Jarret, "Next Wednesday, at six o'clock, the evening stage pulls into Tassajera."

"Unless I was tuh stop it," chuckled the Bravo Kid.

"Which you won't," said Jarrett, sternly. " 'Cause that's what they'll expect. The stage will stop at the bank. Two cashiers will come out and take the bank's specie shipment inside an' lock it in the vault, with the gun messenger standin' by to cover 'em. As they unload it, that's where you'll come in savvy?"

"What about the sheriff?"

"He's snuffy," conceded Jarrett. "But he won't count in this job, even if I have tuh kill the old fool. We overplayed our hand in lettin' the mob tar his kid. Up to that time, I had him right where I wanted him. He had to have the job so's to send his boy money to keep him in school. When Carson come home was our first bad break. I was able to keep the old man in line then by threatenin' that if he jumped wrong, his boy would eat some lead. Then come the ruckus about my lettin' you out an' the tar an' feather party. I could of stopped all that—and

should. But I didn't and they've never found hide nor bones of Carson. It's killin' Lang an', so he tells me, he's takin' others with him. Meanin' me. If another Ranger shows, I'll kill Ol' Lang to shut him up."

The Bravo Kid chuckled. "I figgered you'd have trouble with that old billy goat," he grunted. "What's my play?"

Jarret pondered. "When you see the dust of the stage rollin' toward town, you set forth to tree the town, like before. Leaving your boys to down the gun guard and take the specie shipment. I've got a plan to send Old Lang to El Paso, but if he don't fall for it, I'll take care of him."

"What if that kid Carson should show up?"

"What? After bein' tarred an' feathered in Tassajera? Don't be ridiculous."

"He's got guts, Jarret. He didn't know that we was play-actin' tuh draw ranger lightnin' offa Lang. He'd uh gone plumb through; I could see that in his eyes."

"Just the same," argued the saloonman, "he won't show. He may be dead. But if he should stick his bill into our business, we'll know what to do with him."

There was more, but having only to do with details. And for an hour after they had parted and ridden their respective ways, Duane sat there at the river bank fixing those details in his mind and splicing together the loose ends of his shattered existence. It was after midnight when he rose to walk back to the line shack. Spittin' Bob had come out from town and Duane could hear his snores lifting from the cabin. Stealthily, the sober youngster threw a rig on the old cowboy's horse, mounted and rode silently away, following the bosque of the Rio toward its far source.

THE Ranger Captain, Hawk Blackman, stared unsmiling at the youngster who had just been ushered into his tent, in the ranger camp at the toe of the Quitman Hills. And for a few clock ticks his trained analytic gaze played with the brittle light in his visitor's eyes, and the outward evidence of the shame he had undergone. Slowly the lawman rose, extended his horny hand in welcome.

"Duane Carson!" he cried. "Well, this is a surprise. Set, an' take a load off yore Justins. I figgered you'd be too busy in Tassajera tuh even recall that yuh knowed me. What fetches you here?"

"You remember offerin'—offerin' me a chance tuh go with the Rangers?" asked Duane, hesitantly.

"Shore do, son! You don't mean that—that—?"

Duane nodded. "I'd like to ride for Texas!"

The Ranger straightened, a slow smile growing on his face. "Set down, kid. When I saw you last, you opined you'd stay an' help Lang Lorison. Is he able to pelt the coon down there without yuh, now?"

Duane lowered his eyes. "Yes," he murmured. "He ought to get along."

"Anything happen down there in Tassajera, Duane, that I orta know about?"

"Nothing," answered Duane, stiffly. "Not a thing."

"All right, then," smiled the lawman. "I'm proud tuh make you one of us. Anything I do fer yuh here will only be temporary an' subject to the will of the Adjutant General's office. But I can make you a Tracker tuh start, sendin' in yore commission fer the cub Ranger of the outfit. Satisfactory."

"Gosh . . . yes!"

Soberly, Cap Blackman administered the oath, shook the youngster's hand. "You'll meet the boys tonight and take your part in this drive I'm making for the Bravo Kid."

Duane's face fell. "Couldn't you assign

me to cut Bravo's sign an' follow it where it leads?" he begged. "Alone?"

"Well—er—" Cap Blackman stroked his steel-trap jaw, his eyes sparkling as he looked right through Duane. "I could, but—sa-a-ay, you got a line on that slippery Kid now, have yuh?"

Duane nodded. "I think I can nab him about next Wednesday. In Tassajera."

"Humph!" The Ranger nodded thoughtfully. "I think mebby I see. Mebby you ain't as frank about things in Tassajera as you might be. But never mind that. I'm old enough to appreciate a well bridled tongue. Yo're on yore own, feller. Go where yuh like an' do what yuh gotta do fer the good uh Texas. If yuh need help, you know where to get it." For a long moment he appeared to study, his smile fading. Then he had turned to withdraw a paper from a leathern *alforja.* "Take this with yuh, son, an' use it if the facts warrant it. Remember that nothing matters to a Ranger but the hard letter of the law. There's no room in this service for softness or sentiment. Good-bye an' good luck to you."

He shook hands and ushered Duane outside. Moments later, when he was out of sight of the camp, Duane examined the paper. It was the official order ousting Old Lang Lorison from the sheriffship of Bravo County.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Lawman Lives!

IT was mid-forenoon when Duane Carson rode again down the main street of the town that had publicly humiliated him. He was sitting straight in the saddle, his eyes focussed sternly upon the adobe house he had once called home, as he steeled himself against the quick buzz of interest his entry provoked, and the surprised whispering and the short, taunting laughter that lifted behind him.

Straight to Lang Lorison's he rode and walked stiffly to the door and inside. He caught the old sheriff packing a telescope grip. For a long, vibrant minute they stared at each other, Old Lang patently startled and confused, Duane coldly studious.

"Why'd you come back?" the sheriff asked, feverishly. "No—not that! You had tuh come back, uh course, though God knows if they'll leave yuh stay. Go ahead! I kin see it in yore eyes. Say what yuh gotta. I've lost everything, includin' my self respect; what you say can't hurt me no worse. I got it comin'. Spill it!"

"You've got me wrong, dad," said Duane, softly, and in his voice was an awful pity for this man who had given him his chance in life. "Where are you goin'?"

"None uh yore business!" barked the harried oldster. "No—I don't mean that, son. I'm goin' tuh El Paso. Be gone mebby a week. When I come back. . . ."

"Why don't you resign before you leave?" asked Duane, quietly.

The older man's eyes bugged. "Resign? Why in hell should I?"

"So that folks can remember you as the sheriff you were, dad," returned Duane. "Not as what you are or what you're intending to be. Next Wednesday evening they're robbin' the stage. Right here in Tassajera!"

"Robbin' the—? Who's robbin' the stage?"

"Friends uh yores, dad! If you're here, they'll kill you!"

"I'd like to see 'em try," barked Old Lang, swelling. "An' I'm givin' 'em the chance."

The youngster thrilled to the returning fire of this man he had worshipped, yet he said firmly, "You wouldn't stand the ghost of a chance. It's best that you go

to El Paso on Toles Jarrett's business. But not as sheriff."

"I'll stay right here—as sheriff," the oldster replied, doggedly. "I ain't forgot all I know about foggin' a gun. Even if it has looked like it."

"And I understand why it's looked like it, dad," answered Duane, gently. "But that's beside the point. Go or stay, that's up to you. But whichever, you'll not be the sheriff of Bravo County."

"Who says—?" Old Lang was staring stupidly at Duane.

"I do!" Duane handed him the ouster.

Lang Lorison opened and read it. Then turned dazed eyes upon his foster son. "You—you're a—?"

"Ranger!" finished Duane. "I'm relieving you of any further responsibility of the law, in Bravo County. If I was you, dad, I'd go to El Paso—an' mebby stay there. Not that they'd—" a grimace now twisted Duane's face— "they'd tar and feather you. But what they may fasten onto you will be a lot harder to get off than tar. Yep, I'd go to El Paso."

If he had expected Old Lang to be crushed, he was disappointed. With a smile, the oldster unpinned his badge, handed it over. And, freed of the weight of that small metallic disc, his gaunt shoulders seemed suddenly straighter. Age seemed startlingly to drop away from him as he resumed the packing of his grip, and an hour later, Duane shook hands with the old man and felt an aching void of loneliness in his breast as Old Lang climbed into the stableman's buckboard for the drive to the railroad.

WEDNESDAY evening! The red disc of the sun had lowered beneath the mauve cirrus clouds in the west. Sitting in the doorway of the sheriff's office, Duane Carson watched that tiny plume of dust grow between the receding lines of the road, the plume that heralded the coming of the evening stage. He was angry and nonplussed. Three of Tassejera's most prominent citizens had laughed at him when he suggested that they place citizen guards over the bank. They scoffed at him as the boy who had betrayed a trust, been tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. Even Old Lang Lorison, Duane recalled, had smiled scornfully as he had been carried away.

Into his solemn thought processes intruded the creak of ungreased wheels, the labored plodding of horses' hoofs. From the corner of his eye he caught the movement of a great hay rack, loaded high with hay. Moving ponderously toward the stable, to which the hay was consigned. Tooling the ponderous vehicle was Spittin' Bob Bangs, his grizzled jaws working vigorously on a huge bait of eating tobacco. And sitting atop the load, staring at him with hungry concern, was Gay Woodford.

Sight of Gay sitting up there brought home to Duane how close, how very, very close this thing was to breaking. Down the steps he sped, her name upon his lips.

"Gay!" he shouted. "Get down off that load. Quickly before—"

"Yes, Duane," she broke in, exactly as if she sensed his meaning. "I'm getting down at the store! Don't worry about me! Don't worry about the—bank. It'll be well covered."

Even as she spoke, Spittin' Bob halted the straining team with a strident, "Whoa", and Gay was climbing down by the hub. That was the moment chosen by Two-gun Platner, alias the Bravo Kid, to tree Tassajera again, driving before him the startled patrons of the Lone Star Saloon, shying shots at such townsmen as were abroad. He came out of the saloon shouting and blaspheming, bellowing something about ". . . . run you yella-bellied coyotes an' hunt yore holes. The

man-eatin' painter cat uh Crazy Crick is howlin' an' takin' over yore town!"

His guns were rolling lead. Gay Woodford was running toward the store, but a bullet plopping the dust beside her feet brought her up short, glaring pridefully, fearlessly at the desperado. Roaring with laughter, Two-gun burned another slug past her ear, then snapped a swift shot at Spittin' Bob as he reached for his hogleg. The old cowpuncher elevated. And Duane was moving toward Two-gun at a fast walk, still hidden from the desperado by the slowly moving load of hay, and withdrawing his Ranger badge from his pocket as he moved, and pinning it in plain sight upon his jacket.

A hoarse whisper lifted from either side of the street as men caught the flash of that badge of gold and blue. The whisper ran through the town like a tocsin.

"Ranger! The kid's a Ranger!"

Duane smiled at the fear in that sigh. Then, having matched the pace of the hay rack to a point opposite Two-gun Platner, he stepped out. His gun, retrieved from the sheriff's office, dangled in his fingers. His voice rang commandingly.

"Wind, Bravo! But you need somethin' to back it up this time. You see, I heard what you an' Jarrett planned, down there at the bosque line camp."

Two-gun stiffened as if frozen. Without shifting his bulky body, his head whipped around, his eyes shuttling to the oncoming ranger. For one brief moment, fear roweled him savagely. Then a loud guffaw burst from his lips.

"Haw, haw, ha!" he bellowed. "Danged if ain't the tar baby come back fer more! Wearin' the badge of a Ranger!" His face grew sober. "So yuh heard things, did yuh? What'd yuh hear? An' what you doin' about it?"

He talked loud, and Duane sensed that the man was really talking for another's ears than his, Duane's. It sent a cold tide of warning through him. Balked in their renegade business, they wouldn't hesitate to murder him, Duane knew. His eyes sought the windows and doors, caught the glint of staring eyes, but no glitter of gun steel. His eyes shuttled down street where the squeal of brakes and the bawl of the mustanger announced the arrival of the stage at the bank. The hay rack was moving slowly toward its objective, Spittin' Bob flaying the straining team. Where were the riders of the Bravo Kid? And what had Gay meant by saying that the bank was covered?

Unconsciously, Duane turned his eyes to see if the girl still stood in the street where Two-gun had stopped her. She was there, and as Duane's eyes met hers, he saw stark terror twist her face.

"Look out, Duane! He's . . . !"

THE roar of a gun cut her off. Two-gun Platner had hurled his body around, firing as he spun. At Gay's scream, Duane had hurled himself down. He swung his own weapon in a quarter circle as Two-gun's two slugs whined above him. Duane hit the hammer just once, and the renegade went down with a ball through the chest.

Gay Woodford was running to Duane, her eyes starting, her face pale in the belief that the youngster had swallowed lead.

"Duane—dear!" she cried, going to her knee in the dust. "Are you hurt bad?"

"Not a scratch, Gay," he answered, and came to his feet. "Thanks to you."

"Thanks to God!" she murmured, and clung to him convulsively.

Duane put her from him, his eyes shuttling to the turmoil suddenly unloosed at the bank. From behind the blacksmith shop poured a tide of riders. Whooping,

spurring, shooting. The scattergun man lifted his weapon and was shot dead. For good measure, some renegade dropped the mustanger.

"For God's sake, get off the street!" barked Duane.

He gave Gay a shove toward the board walk, broke into a run toward that kaleidoscopic action at the bank. And thus it happened that he was looking right at it when it happened. The hay on the rack seemed suddenly to erupt and spew out men. Spittin' Bob dropped the ribbons, hit dirt rolling lead. Mort Woodford, Flying W boss, came into the clear, tossing straw from his shaggy mane and wielding two guns. Right behind him came Old Lang Lorison to plant himself solidly and toil at his triggers. The Flying W cowhands were yelling like Injuns and spraying the trapped renegades with lead.

The cohorts of the Bravo Kid were falling, trying to escape and failing, hemmed in as they were by a deadly ring of steel and lead and fighting iron. Duane skidded to a stop. Then he was whirling as Gay's wild scream sheered through the gun echoes.

Before the Lone Star Saloon, Toles Jarrett strode with Gay Woodford, holding the girl before him as a shield. His gun menaced Duane, who was at a little too long a range for accurate targeting by a moving gunman.

With an oath, Duane started toward him. But Jarrett brought him up short.

"Stop coming, Ranger-man. I'll drop yuh sure. And if I should miss you, I'll down this filly you're so sweet on."

As he fired that broadside of diabolic threat, he reached the door of the Lone Star. Duane dared not make a move against him. He could not shoot, for fear of hitting Gay. He dared not press the desperate saloonman too close lest he carry out his threat of killing the girl. Gay was silent now, stunned by the awful fear of what Duane might attempt. And Duane stood watching Jarrett pull the girl through the swing doors.

NOW Duane started after him, timing his steps to the beat of the saloonman's boots on the barroom floor. There was nothing to be done save to follow the man and wait for a break.

Like an automaton, Duane walked through the saloon doors. His gun held before him. His eyes daring the few frightened and shrinking patrons and the sweating bar menial who stood with lifted hands. As Duane walked in, Jarrett led Gay out the back. As Duane went out the back, Jarrett was vanishing inside the maw of the big barn he used for a private stable.

Step by step, Duane approached that doorway, steeling himself for the crushing pain of the expected slug. He asked only that he be granted consciousness and strength to spot the flash of Jarrett's gun and plant one bullet to the right of it.

"Last warning, Ranger-man!" the saloonman cried, and Duane thrilled that the little badge on his breast had changed him in the eyes of this renegade from the town boy who had been tarred and feathered to a man he dared not fire at.

"Stay out, Duane," cautioned the girl. "Don't risk your life on a deal where he holds all the aces. I'll—"

"Shut up!" snarled Jarrett, and Duane heard the smash of his palm against her mouth.

Mighty anger swelled in Duane and he swayed forward. The slither of boots stopped him. Old Lang Lorison came legging it around the saloon to pause at the corner of the barn. His eyes, deep set, were on Duane.

"I saw him glaum Dumplin'," he whispered, hoarsely. "Where's he at?"

Duane said nothing, but unconsciously his eyes turned through the doorway. Then, before he could so much as cry out against it, the old timer had drawn his gun, taken two long strides and popped inside. From the gloom came a flash. Duane saw Old Lang stagger. Yet he couldn't shoot. He leaped ahead. The barn was filled with shuddering gusts of sound. Old Lang was stumbling forward into the saloonman's murderous fire. One shot! Two! Three! Old Lang was going down. But Duane was close now to his man, his gun swinging to its target opening. The gun roared; Jarrett screamed. Two men were down, thrashing on the straw-littered floor.

Gay leaped over the fallen renegade. "Uncle Lang!" she repeated over and over again. "Why'd you do it?"

Then Duane was kneeling beside her, looking into the flickering eyes of the man who had picked him off the range, who had schooled him and given him his chance. Those eyes were smiling a little.

"Son," he said painfully. "We made it a wipeout—me an' Dumplin'. Fer—fer you. Pay fer the—the hell they served me—an' you."

"You were great, dad," choked Duane, his fingers finding the old man's bloodless hand. "You make me ashamed that I took your star. . . . "

"Tush!" scoffed the stricken oldster. "If you hadn't, I'd never found nerve to square the account with Toles. The office had broke me, son. Fear uh losin' the money it earned me an'—an'—"

"I savvy, dad," choked the youngster. His fingers were busy tearing up the official ouster order and pinning the tarnished sheriff's badge on that shrunken, heaving chest. Slowly, painfully, Old Lang's fingers came up to caress the badge. He smiled.

"Yo're givin' it back!" he whispered incredulously. "Then—then I cash my—my chips in the line uh duty, eh?"

"What you talkin' about — cashin' chips?" asked Duane. "I'll get you to Doc Adams an', soon as you can cripple around, I'll show you to Tassajera as the man—"

Old Lang shook his head weakly. "I'm done, son. . . . Dumplin'! Shot center. It's all right. But you'll tell 'em I—I went out shootin'—shootin' Tassajera full uh law an' order? Duane? Dumplin'?"

At their tearful nods, the old man sighed, closed his eyes and was gone—a man who had been strong, gone weak and, in the end, gleaned the strength for manhood's needs from the one he had endowed with strength in the beginning.

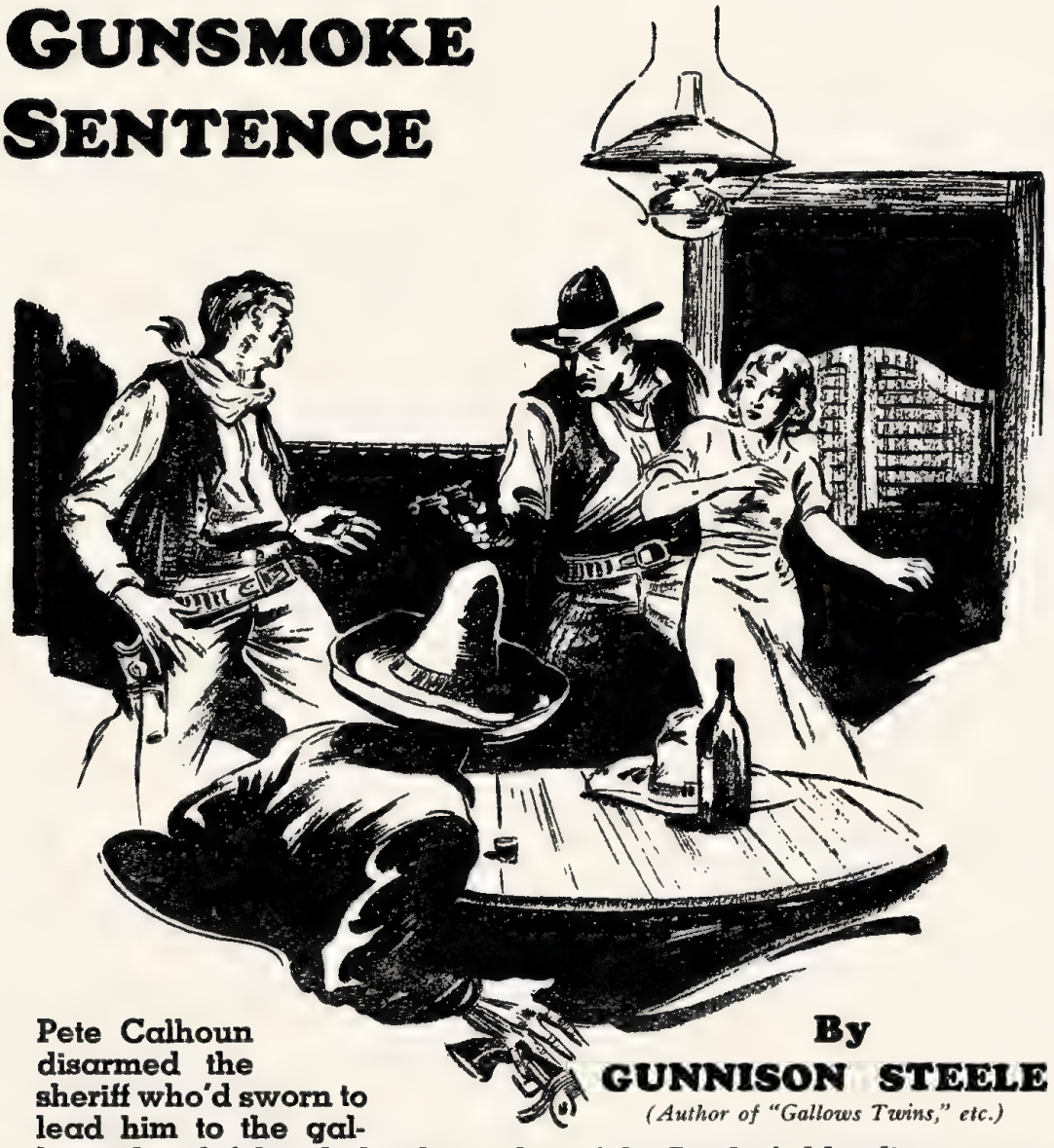
* * *

ONCE a month when the Sunday chuch bell tolls, Duane Carson and his wife, the charming mistress of the big Flying W Ranch, go to the tree-shaded plot in the little burial ground and lay a flower on the granite boulder that marks the last resting place of Old Lang Lorison. Gay with an humble prayer of thankfulness for the man Old Lang brought her; Duane appreciative and grateful for the sacrifice an old man made to bring peace and order out of the once lawless heart of Bravo County. And Tessajera folks, following their example, make that grave a shrine, where they pay tribute to the sheriff who lives in their memory just as Old Lang would have wanted it.

"The daddy of Tassajera law," they'll tell you, with pride. "Six terms in office an' he'd have been there yet if he hadn't gone out with smokin' gun in the biggest clean-up of renegades in Bravo's history. Some sheriff, an' his boy's outa the same mold. Yes sir!"

THE END

GUNSMOKE SENTENCE



Pete Calhoun disarmed the sheriff who'd sworn to lead him to the gallows, then left him behind in a den of the Border's bloodiest renegades. Yet with him, like a ghost, rode the picture of a lawman being tortured to death—while he, an outlaw, rode to empty safety.

By GUNNISON STEELE
(Author of "Gallows Twins," etc.)

SHERIFF BUCKSHOT BRAND was dozing with booted feet tilted comfortably atop his scarred desk when the sound of an exploding shotgun rocked the hot silence. The rawboned old lawman's boots jarred the floor as he plunged to the open doorway of his office. His squinty eyes knifed along Wolfhead's sun-drenched street, focused on a swirl of action a block away.

A long-legged dun gelding, topped by a lean, reckless-eyed young giant, was pounding up the street. In one hand the bronzed rider clutched a bulging gunny sack, in the other a long-barreled forty-five. Behind him on the board sidewalk

a paunch-bellied man waved an empty shotgun excitedly over his head, his high-pitched squalls arousing the town.

"Holdup! Pete Calhoon's robbed the bank!"

The blond young giant never looked back. A man leaped from a doorway ahead of him; saw the sinister horseman and clawed for his gun. The rider's forty-five roared redly, and the Wolfhead citizen ducked abruptly back through the doorway. The big horseman laughed reckless defiance as he roweled the dun.

Buckshot Brand took a backward step. He flipped his scarred sixgun out and up as the horseman came even with him. Never in his life had old Buckshot missed at fifty feet.

"The crazy fool!" he muttered fiercely. "The crazy damn young fool!"

Deliberately he shifted his gun-muzzle an inch as he pulled trigger. The rider twisted aside, his hot eyes raking the old lawman as he flashed by. He grinned derisively, holstered his gun.

Wolfhead roared to sudden life. A dozen men boiled into the street. Gun-thunder rolled along the hotel street; vengeful lead snarled after the blond young bank-looter. But already the fleet dun gelding was streaking from the upper end of the street and away across the plain.

Buckshot Brand holstered his gun and plowed through the dust toward the bank. The paunchy man had joined a white-faced young cashier inside, and they were checking their loss. The fat banker pounced with spluttering wrath upon Sheriff Brand as the lawman entered.

"Hell of a law! Wiped out, and by that young hellion, Calhoon. But he'll pay—I'll see him rot in the pen for this!"

"Not till he's caught," said Buckshot, grimly. "But the pen won't get 'im—seems like he's already wanted for the gallows."

"And I'll watch him swing," snapped Bart Wolf, president of the Wolfhead National. "He should have swung a year ago, if we'd had the right kind of lawmen in this county."

"Wolf," said Buckshot softly, "you talk too damn much!"

"Talk too much, do I? Somethin' more'n talkin's needed, with gallows bait like Pete Calhoon ridin' wild and free, laughing at the law, robbin' and killin'—"

Buckshot swung on the shifty-eyed banker, his own eyes coldly contemptuous, the lines gouging deeper into his gray face.

"Button yore loose lip, Wolf!" he said flatly. "Pete Calhoon is an outlaw because you made 'im one. If he's killed and robbed, he done it because you and yore rotten crowd drove 'im to it. When he robbed yore bank, he jest took a little o' what yuh robbed him of. But robbin' even a skunk like you is bustin' the law. If he can be caught I'll bring 'im back—and I'll be luggin' to the noose a better man than you or me!"

"Brand, I'll sue you for slander and libel! "I'll—"

"Sue and be damned! Hell, Wolf, don't I know you stole that boy blind for a year, forcin' 'im to come to you for a mortgage against his little outfit? Don't I know you kept stealin' from him, makin' sure he couldn't pay off that mortgage when it fell due? Then, when he still kept fightin' with his back to the wall, you sent out a coupla o' yore gun-slicks to do the job up brown. But he killed 'em both, fair and square, and you framed him to the gallows, Wolf—would have, if he hadn't broke jail and took to the outlaw trail. Hell—"

Old Buckshot turned with a sardonic grin to the men who had crowded in from the street. "Hombres, there's $2,000 on Pete Calhoon's head. And I'm needin' a posse. . . ."

THERE was a gleam of fierce satisfaction in his tawny eyes as Calhoon rode fast across the gully-slashed plain toward the fiery-crested Esquelitos Hills that bristled along the Border. He knew he had out-distanced Buckshot Brand's law-posse; knew that, barring accidents, he would reach the Border before other posses could whip in ahead of him and cut him off.

The red sun was lowering. The big dun ran easily though the pace had tired him. The Border was yet thirty miles away. But Calhoon knew a place down there in the foothills where he could rest in comparative safety for a while and get a fresh mount—for a price.

For on the fear and wickedness of other men Tusk Harl had grown fat and prosperous.

Pete slowed the dun as he neared the place known from Yuma to El Paso as Harl's Hole. Sun had set as he rode among the silent hills, and ebony shadows were flowing like dirty water through the ravines. A chill wind snaked among the cliffs.

Dusk had deepened to black night when he rode down into the bowl-like depression in the hills that was Harl's Hole. The bowl was grass-covered, well-watered, rimmed by rocky walls and crags. Tusk Harl was supposed to be a rancher, and did run a few head of wild cattle among the hills; he even called his twelve-room *posada* a ranch-house.

But his place was really a way-station on an old outlaw trail that snaked up out of Mexico. It was from these hard-riding, quick-shooting hombres who rode the gun-trails that he gleaned his endless stream of gold. They accepted Harl's protection, swilled his vile whiskey; they paid his price, and rode away to curse his memory in the scarlet glows of hidden campfires.

Clutching a money-filled gunny sack, Calhoon stalked unannounced into the *posada's* big front room which had been made into a combination bar, gambling den and dining room. A single kerosene lamp swinging from the ceiling furnished dirty illumination. At one end was a bar. Tables, used for poker or eating as the occasion demanded, dotted the room.

Deliberately Pete Calhoon's eyes swept the room. Harl, he saw, had company tonight. Five sun-darkened, evil-faced men played poker at one of the tables.

Ignoring the men at the table, Pete strode to the filthy bar where Tusk Harl sat hunched. Harl was enormous, with mountains of flesh billowing from his bones. Stiff red hair bristled from his face and hands, giving him an appearance of a huge red spider, poisonous and ugly.

There was enmity between the blond renegade and Harl. But now, as he wheezed to his feet, fear of Pete Calhoon crowded the hate from Harl's voice.

"How, Pete? Long time no see."

"Whiskey!" Pete rasped shortly. "Whiskey, then somethin' to eat. Happens I'm in a hurry."

"Yuh allus are, Pete," Harl grinned greasily, tiny eyes probing slyly at the money sack. "No need to hurry—Tusk'll take care o' yuh."

"Yeah, long as I've got gold to pour down yore fat throat. Whiskey, I said!"

Harl poured whiskey into a glass from a two-gallon jug. Pete downed the fiery liquid at a single gulp. At Harl's eager gesture, he shook his head.

"Somethin' to eat, *muy pronto!*"

HE TURNED with a quick motion and placed his back to the bar, aware that tense silence held the big room. The five men at the table had forgotten their cards. They stared with a mixture of insolence, hate and respect at Calhoon.

Calhoon eyed them contemptuously a

moment, shrugged his powerful shoulders, turned and stalked to a second table several yards away. He knew the five, and they knew him.

The leader of the five was the sinister figure known along the Border as *El Cato* —The Cat—as cruel and deadly and quick to kill as the animal whose name he bore. The four others were his followers, every man gallows bait if justice ever overtook them.

In *El Cato's* veins flowed that poisonous blood mixture of Mexican and Yaqui Indian. Lithe, swarthy, cruel-eyed, he was dressed flashily as a *caballero* in skin-tight velvet trousers with gleaming silver buttons down each leg. He wore a peaked sombrero, an ornate gunbelt and a scarlet sash was about his slim waist.

In *El Cato's* evil heart hate and vengeance fires swirled endlessly for Pete Calhoon. For *El Cato* could no longer strut and swagger as he once had—a year ago a bullet from Calhoon's gun had given him a leg injury that made him walk with an ugly limp.

Calhoon was aware of the hate boiling behind *El Cato's* mask of sleek suavity, of the greed in the eyes of his henchmen as they eyed the gunny sack which he had placed on the table before him. But he missed *El Cato's* quick gesture, the significant glance that passed between the breed and Tusk Harl before the fat *posada* keeper turned and waddled into a back room.

Impatiently Calhoon waited for Harl to bring food. He knew old Buckshot Brand's posse would be clinging grimly on his trail; that by now news of the hold-up would be on ahead of him, flinging other posses into the manhunt. He cursed Harl's slowness, knowing that he should be on his way to the Border.

Again a feeling of satisfaction surged through him as he eyed the bulging gunny sack before him—not because he cared for or needed the money it contained, but because that money had belonged to Bart Wolf. The vengeance-lust in his heart against Wolf had not lessened during the two years that had elapsed since the money-mad Wolfhead banker had driven him down the renegade trail.

Two years ago Pete Calhoon had been a respected rancher, ambitious to build up his little outfit; then Bart Wolf, dreaming of empire with himself as King, had marked him for ruin.

And now Pete Calhoon had given up all hope of regaining his spread; now he hoped only to escape across the Border, to work his way up into the Oregon country, there to begin a new life under a new name. . . .

HEARING a light step, Calhoon looked up to see *El Cato* smiling sleekly and bending in a bow beside him.

"We meet again, amigo!"

"So it seems," agreed Calhoon.

"Ah, Señor Pete ees not forget the old grudge, no? He does not weesh to be amigos?"

"Least of all with you, *El Cato!*"

"Ees eet, señor Pete, that you would feel the dishonor to be *El Cato's compadre?*"

Calhoon shrugged his great shoulders. "Call it what you like. Hell, can't I see the hate foaming in yore eyes—don't I know you'd like to slit my gizzard, if you had the guts to try? This is my busy night—and I'm hungry!"

An instant they faced each other, outlaws both. Silence, death-freighted, clutched the room. Calhoon sat with his big body hunched across the table, cold-eyed, contemptuous, one hand fondling the money sack. *El Cato* stood on wide-spread legs, one hand under his gaudy jacket, indecision torturing his eyes that crawled with the lust to kill.

But knowledge of Pete Calhoon's cold deadliness conquered the breed. He whirled, stalked back to the table where he talked in low tones with his hard-eyed henchmen.

On Pete's left was a door that opened into a wide hallway. The big renegade's eyes narrowed suddenly, the only sign of the stark amazement that gripped him as this door was opened slowly and a figure came into the bar-room.

The girl paused just inside the doorway, gazing with wide, uncertain eyes about the room. She was slim, red-lipped, dark-haired, with a hint of fear in her young eyes.

Then she crossed the room and seated herself at a table near *El Cato* and his bold-eyed Border ruffians.

Tight-lipped, Pete Calhoon's eyes probed at her, unable to answer the questions that beat at his brain. A pretty young girl, unspoiled, with fear in her eyes—in Harl's Hole! What bitter twist of fate had brought her into this den of wolves?

Pete shrugged powerful shoulders. It was no affair of his.

Harl returned, bringing food which he placed on the table before Calhoon. Then he waddled over to the table where the girl sat with lowered eyes. Calhoon saw the girl shrink away, instinctive dislike in her clear eyes.

A quick impulse to kill lashed at Pete Calhoon. But he put the impulse resolutely aside, and attacked his food.

He heard the girl order food in a low voice, saw Harl go into the back room and return almost instantly with steaming dishes. The girl ate slowly, daintily, obviously aware of *El Cato's* crude attempts at attracting her attention.

Calhoon toyed with his food, waiting. Several times, as the flirtatious attempts of *El Cato* and his ribald cronies grew bolder, the girl glanced with frightened, pleading eyes at the blond renegade.

But Calhoon refused to meet her eyes. He had no time to become mixed in a brawl over some fool girl who should have had more sense than to come here. The Border was yet twenty miles away, and Buckshot Brand was close.

He lingered over his food, watching, when he knew he should be riding. Marked with an unjust brand of murder, Pete Calhoon had nevertheless hewn to his own rigid creed; fair play, deep respect for a good woman. . . .

THIS slim, red-lipped girl, he knew, was good—and into the game against her had been slicked a stacked deck.

Now the breed had left his cronies, had gone over and, after a sweeping bow, seated himself with the girl at her table. He was speaking softly, a smirking smile on his hawkishly cruel features, careful that his words did not reach Calhoon.

Suddenly Pete saw her glance at him, obvious alarm in her young eyes. The big outlaw grinned sardonically. Now that she knew he was gallows bait, he thought a little savagely, she would turn her pleading eyes toward him no more—she would choose what she considered the lesser of two evils—*El Cato!*

But he was wrong; the girl's intuition saw what lay beneath the breed's suave features and soft words. The fear deepened to terror in her eyes.

Calhoon grinned raggedly, silently cursing himself. With posses storming on his backtrail, and a noose waiting for his neck, he sat here like a stubborn jackass—because a stacked deck had been slicked into the game against a clear-eyed girl!

A wave of self-derision swept through him. But he couldn't still the fiercely warring emotions in his heart.

Abruptly he got to his feet, seized the

money sack and stalked to the bar. Tusk Harl reached eagerly for the whiskey jug, but Calhoon shook his head.

"I'll drink—later!" he snapped, and jerked a thumb toward the back room.

Reluctantly Harl followed the renegade into the shadowy room.

Calhoon asked tersely: "Who is she, and what's she doin' here?"

"No use gettin' riled, Pete. Her name's Lana Morgan, if yuh gotta know. She was ridin' through the country, headed for Nogales where she's got an uncle or somethin'. Happened she was close enough to see my place when her hoss went lame, so she stopped by and asked if she could stay all night. I couldn't turn her down, now could I?"

"Maybe you'll wish you had!"

"You ain't gonna start no ruckus, Pete?" Harl asked fearfully. "You know *El Cato*—he's poison. If you horn in he'll kill yuh, 'cause he's made up his mind he's—"

"That he'll get the girl, eh?" Calhoon spat. "It wouldn't be the first time *El Cato's* stolen girls and kept them till he got tired of 'em, then carried 'em across the Border."

"What can I do?" Harl whimpered. "She wanted to stay all night, and I couldn't help it if the breed saw her."

Pete thought of the Border, yet thirty miles away, of the posses that would soon be cutting in to head him off—he thought of the peaceable Oregon country, beckoning with golden promise.

"Damn her, she'd oughta had more sense than to be traipsin' about in this country without her nurse!"

"That's talkin' sense!" Calhoon couldn't see the evil satisfaction that seeped into Harl's crafty eyes in the shadows. "Have a drink on me before yuh ride, Pete."

"I pay for my whiskey," said the outlaw contemptuously.

HE STRODE back to the bar. Harl poured a glass brimful from his jug of vile whiskey. Calhoon stood with his broad back turned to Lana Morgan, to *El Cato*, and his Border cut-throats.

He lifted the glass and gulped a single swallow of the raw liquor. Then slowly he lowered the glass to the bar. Fierce rage, like a gathering storm cloud, boiled in his tawny eyes.

Tusk Harl watched, and quaking terror supplanted the evil triumph in his fat-rimmed eyes as Calhoon's unchained passion lashed furiously out at him.

"Damn you, Harl, I'll teach yuh to dope my whiskey!"

Eyes blazing with anger, Calhoon's big hand swooped. Tusk Harl squalled with frantic fear as the gaping gun-muzzle levelled on his eyes.

But slowly the renegade's trigger-finger loosened. He raked a hand dazedly across his eyes, shook his head to clear his brain of the slow mist that was clouding it. Fiery prongs were twisting inside his stomach. Flint realized that even the small amount of the doped whiskey he had swallowed was having its deadly effect, and fresh anger lashed like a blacksnake whip at his heart.

Tusk Harl had staggered back against the wall, where he stood, whimpering softly, agate eyes shiny with fear. Calhoon knew that a deathly silence had gripped the room. From the corner of his eye he saw the girl, tense-bodied and seemingly bewildered by the sudden turn of events; saw the triumphant sneer that curled *El Cato's* cruel lips, the indecision fogging the eyes of his henchmen as they watched the raging young giant.

Calhoon's lips drew back from strong teeth in a snarl as he jabbed the sixgun at Tusk Harl.

"Coffee! Coffee, hot and strong. And no dope, yuh fat hog, or I'll kill yuh! *Sabe?*"

Shaken by the stark death he saw flaming from the renegade's tawny eyes, Harl waddled into the back room; returned instantly with a steaming coffee-pot and tin cup. At Pete's gesture, he sloshed the cup full.

Braced on wide-spread legs, Pete lifted the cup and gulped the bitter, scalding liquid and shoved the cup across the bar.

Fiercely, draining cup after cup of the black, scalding coffee, Calhoon fought the drug that was trying to claim him. His mind reeled. Stringy black fingers were probing at his brain, numbing it, filling it with a purple mist.

A lesser man than Calhoon would have surrendered to the tugging black fingers in his brain. But he fought desperately, despairingly, to hold his head erect, to keep his eyes and his gun on *El Cato* and his Border wolves. For now the breed had shed his mask of sleek suavity; the hate and vengeance-lust blazed naked in his black eyes as he watched his almost helpless enemy.

The breed, Pete knew, would not ignore this chance for wreaking vengeance on the man who had crippled him.

HE DIDN'T see *El Cato's* quick gesture, nor the hand of the squat, bearded hombre as it snaked toward a holstered gun; he missed the girl's lithe movement as her hand darted underneath her jacket, and came out clutching a black Colt thirty-eight. But the squat man's scream, beating hard on the snarling boom of the thirty-eight, ripped like a thin lance of flame through Pete's fogged brain.

He whirled.

The girl was on her feet, was backing slowly toward the bar, gun-muzzle steady on the Border ruffians. The squat bandit, his unfired gun clattering on the floor, had slumped across the table before him, his life's blood cascading across the rough surface to the floor.

Calhoon straightened. The coffee had washed some of the drowsiness from his brain. Now he could think; now he could see the amazement distorting the faces of the killers, the indecision torturing their evil eyes. His own eyes flicked to the white-faced girl who now stood beside him, smoking gun still in her hand.

Pete grinned, said: "Damned if yo' ain't all right, girl!"

"I—I killed him!" she whispered, slow horror welling in her dark eyes as her gaze touched the stark figure on the floor. "Oh, can't we leave this terrible place?"

"We'll leave," Calhoon said.

He stared hard at the baffled killers. Abruptly his brain was clear, calculating. Suddenly he knew that the debt he owed Lana Morgan, his desire for her safety, was greater than the killing anger in his heart.

He said to the girl: "Go saddle yore horse and get ready to ride. In a corral down by the creek you'll find the horses belongin' to these hombres, and half a dozen others. Open the gate and chase 'em all into the desert, and come back here. Hurry!"

She slid quickly through the doorway into the hall.

Pete prodded Tusk Harl from behind the bar. Sudden grim humor supplanted the searing rage in his tawny eyes. He seized the whiskey jug, the partially empty glass, sloshed it brimful with the doped whiskey.

He shoved the glass toward Harl. "Drink it!"

"Hell, Pete," Harl whimpered, "it'll kill me!"

"I'll kill yuh," Pete spat, "if yuh don't!"

The posada keeper's hesitation was slight; a half-pint of doped whiskey in his belly was not so certain as the death he saw blazing from Calhoon's eyes. He clutched the glass and drained the liquid

to the last drop; whining in his fat throat, he staggered back against the wall where he stood with eyes shiny with fear.

Pete watched, grinning coldly as the inn-keeper slid with drooping eyes down the wall and wallowed in the filth behind the bar.

The renegade's eyes had never left the four killers. Now he faced them, his voice harsh in the silence that held the room.

"Greaser, you put that pig up to this! Didn't have the guts to face me fair and square, even with yore gun-slicks at yore back, eh? Doped me, damn you! But I ain't dead yet."

"Maybe," purred the breed, "señor Pete would be bettaire off so. Maybe eet—"

"Maybe," snapped a cold, hard voice behind Calhoon, "yuh'd all better h'ist yore hands, quick!"

PETE'S big body stiffened. Buckshot Brand stood just inside the back doorway, squinty eyes grim, a levelled forty-five in his fist.

Thoughts, like tiny bursts of flame, stabbed Pete's brain. From the corner of his eye, he saw the flames of hate boiling behind *El Cato's* black eyes as the breed stared at Sheriff Brand.

For the gun feud between Buckshot Brand and *El Cato's* Border gang was deadly, almost a legend along the Line. The breed's hate for Calhoon was negligible compared to his venemous hatred for the rawboned old lawman—a hatred that could be satisfied only by the hellish torture of which *El Cato* was capable.

Indecision tortured Calhoon's eyes as he waited for other figures to step from the shadows behind Buckshot Brand. Then he remembered that old Buckshot was a lone wolf; he had left his posse while he followed a hunch of his own, for it had been said of old Buckshot that he needed no posse to bring in a lone lawbreaker.

"Looks like you hold the top hand, Buckshot," said Calhoon.

"Looks like it, Pete," Buckshot's voice was tinged with regret. "Just drop yore gun, slow and careful!"

Something cold and hard bored into Buckshot Brand's back. A voice, soft and low, but freighted with menace, said in his ear:

"You are the one to drop your gun, Sheriff. Quick!"

The old lawman faced death in front or behind. The lines gouged deeper in his gray face. But he had a chance in front; swift, stabbing death, he knew, crouched behind.

His gun clattered to the floor.

"That's twice, girl," said Pete Calhoon.

Without taking his eyes from the breed and his killers, he backed toward the rear door. He took Sheriff Brand's gun from the floor, snaked another from the lawman's belt. His gaze touched the slim girl, standing in the doorway with the thirty-eight in her hand.

He asked: "All ready to ride?"

"Ready," she said.

"You stampeded the horses?"

"They're half a mile away by now."

"Good!" His face was tight as he said to the sheriff: "Sorry, Buckshot! I'll leave yore nag a mile down the trail—if you should need him. Adios, hombres!"

FIVE minutes later they were riding swiftly southward across the rough floor of the bowl. Calhoon feared no pursuit. The mounts of *El Cato's* gang, those that Harl kept, had been stampeded into the desert. A mile from the posada, he released Buckshot Brand's weary horse.

Calhoon rode grim-eyed beside the girl. A chill night wind beat against his face, washing the last of the purple mist from his brain. But his thoughts, as his brain cleared, were jumbled, confusing.

Now, for the first time, he realized

fully what he had done. He remembered the hate and vengeance-lust flaming in the baffled eyes of the breed and his killers; and the knowledge in Buckshot's squinty eyes, as he stood stripped of his guns before his deadly enemies, that he faced death, or worse.

Instinctively he slowed the dun. Once, before Bart Wolf had driven him down the outlaw trail, Buckshot Brand had been his friend. . . .

Then the big renegade grinned sardonically in the night. He was an outlaw, wanted for the gallows; and for two years, prodded by the sense of duty that was his fetish, Buckshot Brand had tried to hound him to a hangman's noose. Acrid bitterness welled fresh in Calhoon's heart as he thought of the unjust wolfish existence into which he had been driven by the greed and lust of his fellow-men.

His gaze lingered on the slim figure of the girl riding ahead of him. He had known but few girls, never one like Lana Morgan. And now she was riding unquestioningly with him into the night, toward the Border and safety—toward the Oregon country with its golden promise of a new life.

But he couldn't forget that old Buckshot Brand was back there at Harl's Hole, alone, without his guns, at the mercy of *El Cato* and his killers. If Buckshot had blocked his path to freedom, Pete would have killed him—but his gorge rose at the thought of the game old sheriff writhing in the merciless clutches of the breed bandit.

He rode on, slowly, his bronzed features a somber mask in the shadows. Warring emotions roiled like a torrent in his heart; self-condemning thoughts tumbled through his brain. For, in addition to leaving Buckshot Brand to face the four snarling gunmen, he had stripped the old lawman of all defense.

Now he visioned what might be happening back at the posada. Death would come easy for old Buckshot. But quick death, Calhoon knew, would not appease the vengeance-lusting brain of *El Cato*. . . .

Abruptly he stopped the dun. Lana Morgan swung her mount, rode back to him, her eyes questioning.

Pete Calhoon's voice was taut. "You ride on, girl. Maybe I'll overtake you. If I don't you'll be safe—now."

"And you?"

"I left somethin' at the posada," he said.

"I guessed—I knew you'd ride back," she said softly. "I saw it in your eyes when we left. And I understand why."

Pete's muscular body tensed under the soft pressure of her hand as she touched his arm for an instant. Fiercely he fought the desire to return to Harl's posada; for he knew that only straight ahead toward the Border lay safety and his chance to begin a new life.

He whirled the dun suddenly, and Lana Morgan's low cry was lost in a thunder of hoofs, as he spurred back toward the posada.

CALHOON'S powerful figure filled the doorway. He stood there on wide-spread legs, shoulders hunched forward. *El Cato* and his henchmen, knowing that without mounts pursuit of Calhoon and the girl would be hopeless, had seized this golden chance for savage vengeance against their hated enemy.

Buckshot Brand had been spread-eagled on the low bar. The old lawman was bare-footed, naked from the waist up, his rawboned body was lacerated and blood-streaked. Buckshot's seamed face was expressionless, taut, but his squinty eyes crawled with agony. A man stood at his head, pinioning his wrists, another held his ankles in powerful hands. *El Cato* stooped over the writhing figure, in his hand a long-bladed knife that was crimson-stained, his black eyes flaming with insen-

sate cruelty and hate. The fourth bandit, leaning against the bar, watched.

Already old Buckshot's punishment had been great. At sight of the raw, ugly welts and slashes on the sheriff's body, fresh rage ripped at Calhoon's heart. His voice lashed harshly across the room.

"Skunks that'll do that ain't fit to live!"

The four at the bar whirled, releasing their hold on Buckshot Brand, their evil eyes still crawling with the inhuman passion that gripped them. Calhoon faced them, his tawny eyes blazing their reckless challenge to *El Cato* and his murderous pack, big hands hanging over the black butts of his holstered guns.

Suddenly the four Border killers were crouched, fingers curled like talons. Then clawed fingers slapped hard over gun-butts, and a deadly gun battle exploded in a cyclonic burst of unleashed fury.

At the same instant old Buckshot Brand flung his lacerated body to the floor behind the thick bar.

The room became a bedlam as guns boomed their ragged red dirge of death. Searing tongues of flame, lead-fanged, criss-crossed the room. Gargoyle figures stood in gunsmoke and triggered hot guns.

Now one of the four was down, groveling on the floor, blinded by the blood that cascaded over his eyes. Another stumbled over him, clawing aimlessly at his throat, evil eyes a-glare with the knowledge that he was dying.

Still the battle raged. Gun-thunder rolled like drum-beats across the valley. Bitter gun-smoke roiled thick in a room that was interlaced with scarlet ropes of flame. There was no sound save the vengeful crash of guns booming their grim requiem of doom.

A bullet seared Calhoon's thigh; his muscular body shivered as another slashed through his shoulder. He staggered, shook his head to clear it of the waves of nausea that rolled over him, braced himself on powerful legs and raised his big guns.

Now a third killer was down, writhing weakly on the floor. The room was suddenly plunged into darkness as a bullet sliced the lamp-cord, smashing the lamp against the floor. The odor of kerosene mingled with the acrid smell of burnt gunpowder.

Then a thin tongue of flame glowed through the blackness, like a scarlet snake across the floor to lick at the tinder-dry bar.

El Cato stood alone, stripped of his false bravado. His staring agate eyes saw the stark bodies of his henchmen on the floor; his cruel features were a mask of craven fear as his gun snapped on empty chambers. Cursing shrilly, he whirled to flee from the sinister, blood-smeared figure of Pete Calhoon.

The breed's scream of terror was throttled by the clutch of steel fingers about his throat. Gradually those great fingers tightened their merciless grip, twisted. . . .

Slowly Calhoon straightened, raked a hand dazedly across his blurred eyes. He was sick, weak, almost too weak to stand. He was only vaguely conscious of the roaring flames about him, of the blistering heat that beat at his face.

He saw old Buckshot Brand rear up, come clawing over the burning bar. Even as he crumpled to the floor, he felt a pair of strong arms about his shoulders. . . .

"WILL—will he die?" asked a soft, anxious voice.

"That hombre's too tough and crazy to die," grunted Buckshot. There was awe in his voice as he added: "Four to one! He ain't human. And there I lay like a scared rabbit, without no gun!"

Calhoon lay a moment with closed eyes. Gradually he remembered. The fight with *El Cato's* gang, flames crackling about his falling body, a pair of arms about his

shoulders. Buckshot Brand had dragged him from the blazing building, to carry him back to a hangman's noose!

He opened his eyes, gazed upward into Lana Morgan's anxious face. He was lying on the ground, his head pillowed on her soft lap. Somehow, he had known she wouldn't ride on without him. . . .

Nearby were the glowing red embers of what remained of Tusk Harl's posada.

Calhoon shifted his eyes to meet Buckshot Brand's steady gaze. Bunched behind the sheriff were half a dozen bearded, familiar-faced possemen who had been drawn by the blasting guns and the flaming posada. He had gambled with death—and the gallows had won. He felt a rush of bitterness, but no regret.

As his head cleared, he sat up. When he spoke his low voice held no trace of the bitterness he felt.

"Looks like yo've got me, Buckshot."

"Stranger," said Buckshot, "I don't know what yo're talkin' about."

"Stranger, hell!" Pete snapped. "You gone crazy?"

"Maybe I have," the old sheriff nodded. "Me and my boys've been hellin' about among these hills since noon, huntin' that murderin' skunk, Pete Calhoon. But that hombre was too slick for us. He's done cheated the gallows."

"Sheriff, this ain't no time for jokin'. You know damned well I'm Pete Calhoon!"

"You?" Buckshot snorted. "Like hell yuh are—I ain't never saw yuh before. And I've got positive proof that Calhoon died aburnin' in Tusk Harl's posada over yonder!"

Startled silence now greeted Buckshot Brand's abrupt announcement. Calhoon started to speak, but something came into his throat and stopped him. Buckshot's features were bland, unsmiling; gave no sign that the grim old lawman was breaking the iron creed of a lifetime—the creed of an honest man sworn to uphold the law he loved.

For the first and last time, Buckshot Brand was placing friendship and the payment of a debt in the path of stern duty.

"Men," he asked, as he turned to his possemen, "I ain't wrong about Calhoon dyin' in that blaze, am I?"

The faces of the six remained sober. They all were honest ranchers, men who once had been Calhoon's neighbors; they had liked him, had hated their job of dogging him to the gallows. Now they followed their sheriff's lead.

"You ain't wrong, Buckshot," one of them agreed. "I guess one o' the bodies in them ashes has got to be Calhoon's."

"And the man," spoke the gray old lawman, "as ever says different, answers to Buckshot Brand!"

"You hombres," Pete began, "are just danged fools. Yuh can't—"

"We can't be bothered with hellin' about after Calhoon no more," Buckshot declared. "As for you, cowboy, this here ain't no good country for strangers. Take Wyomin', now, or Oregon—I hear they got some right nice range up there."

"I been thinkin' about Oregon," Calhoon agreed, weakly.

Buckshot turned to the slim girl. "And you—where do you live, girl?"

"I don't have any home," Lana Morgan's dark eyes were lowered sadly. "My mother died a year ago. I've been working in El Paso since, but a month ago I lost my job. I was on my way to visit an uncle in Nogales, though I know he don't want me—when this happened. Now. . . ."

"I'll see yo're took care of," Buckshot declared gruffly. "Where d'you crave to go?"

The girl's eyes were steady as they met Pete Calhoon's.

"I always thought," she murmured, "that I'd like the Oregon country."

GUN BOSS OF HELL'S WELLS

Fast Action in a Ghost Town Rendezvous

That was a strange gun-partnership of old Flint Stoneman, grizzled veteran of the dark trails, and the Kid, a youngster with lightning in his hands and the arrogance of youth in his backbone. For it was made by force when the Kid gunned the oldster into an owlhoot hangout where all were their enemies—and the pledge of friendship was written large in gunsmoke.

FLINT STONEMAN'S camp, such as it was, lay in order, with a slab of venison broiling over the coals for breakfast. Flint was shaving, kneeling before a small, still pool, an eddy of the rapid stream by which he had camped. His shaving tools were few and crude, consisting of a lighted candle stub, and wet shirt tail.

Using the pool for a mirror, Flint would burn off the beard stubble on his jutting angular jaw, then, before he burned himself, he would apply the wet towel.

As he looked into the pool and saw his image, he grinned a little, although he was familiar with all the details the slightly crooked nose, the wide-set, granite-hard eyes, the shock of untidy, already graying hair; the broad sweep of the thick shoulders. The rest of him was chunky, covered with dusty shirt and levis. Only the heavy guns sagging at his hips looked trim and tidy, but even they were well worn.

He leaned over, candle poised, waiting for the wind-ripple to die down. As he did so, something plunked into the pool smash-

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A Novelette by LUKE SHORT
(Author of "Blood of His Enemies," etc.)

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Using the pool for a mirror, Flint would burn off the beard stubble on his jutting angular jaw, then, before he burned himself, he would apply the wet towel.

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He leaned over, candle poised, waiting for the wind-ripple to die down. As he did so, something plunked into the pool smashing his reflection. The drops had not settled before Flint had whirled, both guns out.

There, ten yards off, was a rider, mounted on a roan.

"Don't ever do that," Flint said, finally. "Not *ever*."

The rider laughed, and immediately Flint saw that he was hardly more than a boy. The stranger swung a leg over the horn and slid to the ground.

"Git back on that bronc!" Flint snarled, nosing up his guns.

"You're pretty damn proddy for a nice May day," the youngster drawled.

"Yeah, I'm a solitary man. Now git on that nag and clear outa' here!"

"Damned if I will," the youngster said. Calmly he hitched up his belt and strolled over to the fire, where he squatted.

Flint stared at him, partly in anger, mostly in amazement. He couldn't figure this one out. The kid was clean looking, too clean looking to be riding this trail. His holsters and guns were new, too big in proportion to his slight, close-knit body. Under his tilted Stetson, a crop of curly blond hair poked out. His eyes were the color of sky on unruffled water, far apart, bold, frank. Flint holstered his guns slowly, almost reluctantly. He caught himself beginning to smile at the kid's nerve, then checked himself.

"My name's Robby Finlay," the kid said, and after a moment, asked: "What's yours?"

"Robert Finlay," Flint said.

The kid stared at him a moment, then grinned. "And I s'pose your horse is named Rocker?"

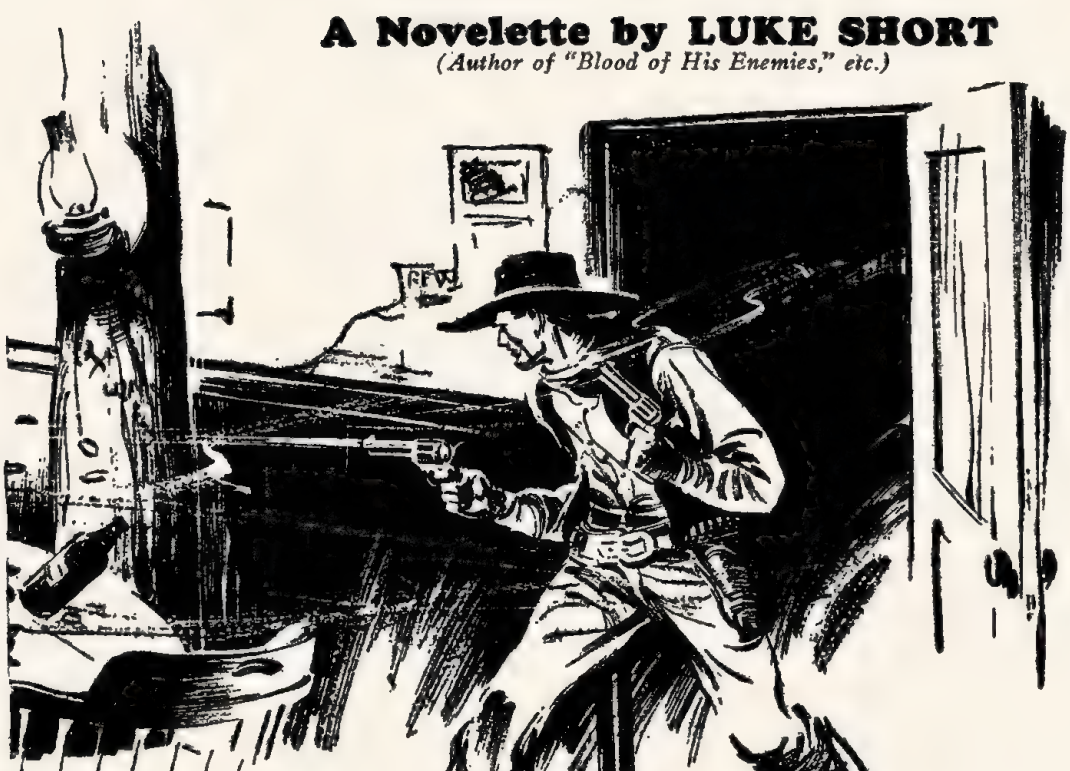
"Might be. What do you want?"

The kid's eyes flickered a little. "Talk. Questions answered."

Flint's heart skipped a beat. He'd been riding for nine days now with a sheriff and a deputy on his tail. A day and a half ago,

A Novelette by LUKE SHORT

(Author of "Blood of His Enemies," etc.)



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"Might be. What do you want?"

The kid's eyes flickered a little. "Talk. Questions answered."

Flint's heart skipped a beat. He'd been riding for nine days now with a sheriff and a deputy on his tail. A day and a half ago,

he had shaken them, and last night was his first whole night's sleep in more than a week. This morning he had risen with a calm, if not exactly pure, heart. Up in Montana was Higgie, his pardner, and Flint was headed that way, for there was a big job in the offing. But now this kid had butted in. Was he with the sheriff? Had the sheriff quit to throw Flint off his guard, then slipped this kid onto the trail to knock him over?

"You're a little green," Flint drawled. "Or else you're talkin' to the wrong man. I never answer questions."

"Ain't you Flint Stoneman?"

Flint's eyes narrowed. His hand dropped to his belt. "Who told you where to find me?"

"No one. I know your picture."

"You'd best forget it. Git right on that roan and head south and forget it. I'd do it quick, too, if I was you."

The kid did not move. Flint felt his anger mounting. Maybe the kid saw something in Flint's eyes, for he streaked his guns up with electric quickness, catching Flint flat-footed.

"I can shoot these things," the kid drawled. "They go off danged easy when nobody answers my questions."

Flint nodded, fighting the fear in his stomach. He had the kid pegged now. He was a killer, one of these tough kids with a draw like a whisper.

"All right," Finlay said evenly. "Number one: which way you goin'?"

"Which way are you?" Flint countered.

"North."

"Then I'm goin' south."

The kid shook his head slowly. "No you ain't, not now, anyway. First thing you do is just raise your hands, real slow-like, and unbuckle them gun belts."

Flint hesitated for the brief part of a second, then shrugged and did as he was bid. He was cursing himself bitterly.

"Now step away from 'em."

Flint did so without voicing any objections.

"You had breakfast?" the kid asked. "No, I see you ain't. Well, eat."

FLINT kept his mouth shut, except to cram the venison steak into it and swill hot slugs of coffee. His mind was working quickly, methodically, trying to figure a way out. But the kid was crafty. He kept squatting a few yards off, guns steady.

Finally Flint was finished.

"Saddle up!" Finlay said.

Flint went about it quickly, for the sooner finished, the sooner he would know what this was all about. He admitted grudgingly to himself that the kid had guts.

Saddled, Flint turned to Finlay. "You got to tip your hand sometime, son. What's the play?"

"Ever hear of Hell's Wells?"

Flint's face was impassive. He knew it well, as did all who rode the owlhoot trail with any frequency. It was a deserted mining town, a few miles down the other slope of this mountain. Pete Hamrick, a broken-down old swamper, had patched the saloon and the hotel, and now the place served as a way-station for riders of the owl-hoot and gave them the drinks, the cards and the sleep they needed before they rode on again. It was as tough as a drunken Apache. The law of the six-gun reigned there, and the best man didn't always win.

"Think a minute," the kid prodded him. "I'd hate to find out you never heard of it. It might put me on the peck."

"I know the place," Flint answered.

Suddenly, the kid grinned. "Good. That's where we're goin'."

Flint shrugged. Why not? It meant booze and some poker, if this proddy kid didn't cut down on him first, and Higgie wasn't in a hurry. Flint mounted, and

turned his bay onto the trail, the kid behind him.

Flint had to smile when he thought of this youngster walking into Pete Hamrick's place. Some drunken gunnie would choose him, and that would be the last of Robby Finlay. Someone like Hoggie Postman, or Tex Michaels—or Borneo Johnny Kilbrou. Flint had heard from a Wells Fargo agent down in Arizona that Borneo Johnny Kilbrou had made the biggest haul in memory when he stuck up the Wild Esmerelda mine in Idaho and got away with more than two hundred thousand in loot. Maybe Kilbrou and his men would be there, for they were old customers of Pete's.

"I think you'll like the place," Flint said to the kid. "It's a nice peaceable town. They'll like you, too."

"Wrong answer," the kid said evenly. "It's tough as hell, but I'm goin' to bust it wide open."

Flint turned and looked at him. Something about the cold set of the kid's jaw told Flint that he meant what he said. And there was something about the way he said it that Flint, tough and cynical, liked.

"You can always try," he admitted.

CHAPTER TWO

Hell's Wells

THEY hit timber line at noon. Flint, just as a matter of principle, watched his chances for a break, but the kid had him covered like a blanket. They crossed the hump in a howling, bitter wind, fresh off the snows of the peaks, and angled down the other side, the kid quick-eyed and wary every moment of the way.

When they hit timber, Flint took a trail, came across another and larger one, followed it two hours, took the right fork and by late afternoon pulled up on a ridge.

He indicated the country in front of him. "There she lies," he said briefly. "You got to look good or you can't see it. Buildin's is weathered bad."

At the base of the ridge, perhaps a quarter mile off, lay the deserted mining town of McCloskey, nick-named Hells Wells. It was made up of one long grass-grown street, flanked by fallen buildings, rotted boardwalks, and general decay. The two buildings closest to the ridge were in a better state of repair, and the street before them was dusty. A few horses stood at the hitch-rack in front of the smallest building, the saloon.

"It don't look bad," the kid said impersonally.

"Neither does a mule," Flint offered. His eyes settled on his own gun belts slung over the kid's saddle horn. He wondered if he should try for them, since the kid was close, and apparently pre-occupied. He looked shrewdly at the kid and decided against it.

Then, almost casually, the kid unslung Flint's belts and handed them to him.

Flint didn't raise a hand.

"Put 'em on," the kid said.

"I ain't grass green, son," Flint drawled. "If you want to cut down on me, leave off the trimmin's."

The kid's mild gaze settled on Flint. "That's up to you," he replied. "Strap on them irons, then we'll argue. I say you're goin' in with me, and you'll likely say you ain't. We'll make it a business deal. If I shoot them sixguns out of your hands, even draw, will you ride in with me like we was travelin' together?"

Flint scowled. "Promise? Hell, what good is my promise?" he asked curiously.

"Every man lives by somethin'," the kid replied calmly. "I've always figured that the jasper that keeps his word is the one that lives the longest. You're close to forty."

Flint grinned. In his two odd decades of riding the owlhoot, no man had ever put it that way to him, but it was true.

Flint himself never took people at their word, but his word was always good. The kid knew it, and it made Flint like him a little more. And with a sudden decision unlike him, Flint reached out for his guns.

"I'll promise—without the shootin'. I'll side you down there, only I'm damned if I see why you want me to."

"That's easy. If I went in there alone, some gunnie that thought I looked easy would make fight talk. That's all the farther I'd get."

"Then you don't think you can take care of yourself?"

"I can take care of myself plenty, and two or three other jaspers, but I can't fight a roomful."

Flint whistled in exclamation and studied the kid's face. He was utterly serious. Grinning to himself, Flint strapped on his belts and spurred his horse.

"All right, son," he said dryly. "I'll try to keep all but two or three off you."

THEY descended the ridge into a canyon that widened out after a little ways into the main street. As they drew up to the saloon, Flint noticed three or four men on the porch.

"Howdy," he growled, as he and Robby ascended the steps. None of the men spoke, but Flint didn't expect them to.

Without a pause, he shouldered through the bat-wing doors, then stepped aside, letting his eyes become accustomed to the dark of the room. He knew old Pete Hamrick at the bar had a gun in his fist, but Flint was known here, and his confidence showed it. He strode over to the bar, ignoring the rest of the room.

"Hullo, Pete," he greeted the barkeep. Pete Hamrick had a thin, unsmiling face like a skull, set on a thin neck. He was tall, bald, and looked utterly bloodless.

He stared at Flint without a flicker of recognition until Flint understood. He introduced Robby to Pete. "Pardner of mine."

"Where's Higgie?" Pete asked.

"Montana. We're on our way up there now."

Only then did Pete unbend, shaking hands with them both. Flint turned and surveyed the room and what he saw he did not like. Two men in cowpuncher's clothes were at the far end of the bar and Flint dismissed them immediately. Across the room there was a poker game in session, six or seven men around a long table. The banker was a thick man, dressed in soiled and expensive clothes. His hair, dark and fairly long, stood straight up and grew far down on his forehead. It was Borneo Johnny Kilbrou—and if Flint could judge by the man's speech, Borneo Johnny was drunk.

"All right, Soapy!" Pete called toward the rear of the room. Through a panel in the rear door, Flint saw the blunt nose of a shotgun withdrawn into the back room.

"You're gettin' flossy, Pete," Flint observed. "You used to take care of trouble from the bar here."

Pete lifted a thin arm gingerly. "I ain't so fast as I was."

Flint grunted sympathetically and ordered two whiskeys. "Where's the boys?"

"Gone," Pete said. "Ain't a one of 'em here except Johnny and his bunch." He leaned down under the counter for a bottle and Flint heard him whisper. "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah," Flint said.

"Then clear outa' here," Pete continued. "Kilbrou's wild—been drunk for a week here. Got his whole bunch with him and he's killin' for fun."

Finlay, listening too, scowled, and looked at Flint in the bar mirror.

Pete stood up now with a fresh bottle which he opened and placed on the counter.

"Thanks," Flint whispered. This was what he had feared.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the cowpunchers at the end of the bar turn and walk leisurely toward the poker table.

"That one of 'em?" Flint asked.

"Oh God," Pete moaned, "he heard me. He's tellin' Kilbrou."

But Robby Finlay had whirled toward the cowboy and both his guns were resting in his palms.

"You, hombre," Finlay drawled quietly. "Come over here."

THE man paused in mid-stride and looked over at them. His thin face slacked in amazement under his dirty, dust-colored Stetson.

The men at the poker table were quiet now, watching Robby with coldly curious eyes. Flint, cursing inwardly, saw a ghost of a smile on Borneo Johnny's face. The cowboy looked over at Borneo Johnny, caught his nod, and walked slowly over to the kid.

Robby holstered his guns slowly. "Have a drink," he said affably.

The cowboy stared at him suspiciously a moment, saying nothing.

"I said 'have a drink'," Robby repeated, indicating the bottle. The men at the poker table were watching the scene in silence. The cowboy gulped, reached for the bottle and poured himself a drink.

"You got big ears for a man your age," Robby observed quietly. A guffaw broke out at the poker table and Flint saw that it was Borneo Johnny. The cowboy still said nothing, but the look of bewilderment on his face was slowly changing into a sneer.

"Yeah," the cowpuncher said warily. He drank his whiskey, but did not take his eyes from Robby. "So what?" he said, putting down the glass.

"Try forgettin' things that ain't your business. It'll save you trouble."

The man sneered, turned on his heel and started for the poker table again.

Robby's guns blurred up again and the man paused, undecided.

"Go on," the kid invited. "That's my best shootin' distance—from here to the table."

Again Borneo Johnny laughed, this time in a vast, delighted roar. Flint stifled a sigh of relief. By some strange whim, Borneo Johnny had decided to allow a stranger to rawhide one of his men. And because he was, Flint judged, the cowboy was dubious about starting a fight.

"Just what the hell is this?" the gunman snarled. "I'm goin' over to that table."

"Go on," Robby invited tauntingly.

In the ensuing silence, the man shrugged, turned and walked back to his companion at the bar. Robby holstered his guns, met unwaveringly the curious stares from the poker table and turned to his drink again.

And once more Johnny's laugh rang out in the room, and it gave Flint an uncomfortable crawling feeling in his back.

"Get out," he whispered. "If he makes a move I'll cover the room, but you clear outa' here. That jasper's poison, you damn little fool."

Robby laughed softly, carelessly, but in the bar mirror he was watching the men at his back.

CHAPTER THREE

Gunman's Test

THEY heard the scrape of chairs as the game broke up and Flint, cold with apprehension, saw Borneo Johnny leave the table and start for the bar, his men trailing him. For one panicky moment, Flint debated cutting down on Borneo Johnny and standing off the rest of them, for Flint was wise in the ways and men

of the owlhoot and he thought he saw trouble coming. It was one thing for a hard-case to walk into an outlaw nest and talk fight, but for a kid like this one to do it was plain suicide. But it was too late now to do anything, and Flint felt the impulse die. He poured himself another drink and waited.

Erect, Borneo Johnny had the squat, long-armed effortless slouch of a gorilla. Ivory-handled Colts sagged at his hips as he walked across to the bar.

Roughly, he sandwiched in between Flint and Robby, his back to Flint.

"I dunno' you, do I?" Borneo Johnny asked Robby. The men took their places at the bar silently, watching the kid.

"I reckon not," Robby said civilly.

"Well, dang me, I want to," Borneo Johnny burst out. He ordered drinks for the house and his men, scattered up and down the bar, looked at each other with mild surprise in their faces, for they, like Flint, had been expecting trouble. Flint edged away a little toward the door, jockeying for a key position in case of trouble.

Borneo Johnny was studying the grave face of the youngster through bleared eyes, and what he saw, Flint decided, was evidently pleasing to him.

"Know who that was you made take water?" Borneo Johnny asked thickly. "Well, he *was* one of my gunnies, name of Lew Potalmi."

The kid didn't say anything and Borneo Johnny bellowed for Lew. The man sidled up to Borneo Johnny, but the chief ignored him.

"I'm wonderin' what you might be doin' here?" the outlaw leader continued.

"Just goin' through," the kid said, indicating Flint with a nod.

Borneo Johnny turned to Flint. "Oh, hullo, Flint," he said, rather coldly.

Flint returned the greeting with the same reserve, for years ago, Flint and Borneo Johnny had, by mutual and unspoken agreement, decided to avoid each other. Flint was no gang leader. He just prowled on his own or with another man, making his daring and ingenuity take the place of gunmen. Borneo Johnny was an outlaw who broke the law with sheer force of men. Flint moved like a shadow; Borneo Johnny with all the fanfare of a Mexican *bandido*. Each had a wholesome respect for the other, but as yet there had never been any occasion for rivalry.

And now, Flint could tell what was coming. Inevitably, he would be drawn into it, and he resolved to cut down on Borneo Johnny first, and very thoroughly.

"Travelin' with Flint, huh?" Borneo Johnny observed. "Makin' any dinero?"

"I ain't asked you for a drink yet, have I?" Robby retorted calmly.

And to Flint's utter amazement, Borneo Johnny laughed again. Yes, there was something winning about the confidence, that was not quite insolence, that the kid possessed.

Suddenly, Borneo Johnny's thick face became serious. "Look here, kid. I ain't much of a hand to beat around the bush. I dunno' how this'll set with you and Flint, but I want you to side me from now on. You're cut outa' the cloth I like—young, quick, and you like a scrap. How about it?"

Flint felt an unreasoning anger at these words, but he did not show it. He wanted the kid to come out flatly with a refusal, but he knew the outlaw's mood could change from joviality to a murdering rage in less than a second. So when Robby, toying with his glass, looked in the bar mirror at Flint, Flint nodded for him to accept. Robby stifled a scowl.

"I might," he conceded. "Flint and me ain't tied up. What's it worth?"

Borneo Johnny clapped the youngster on the shoulder and called for a round of drinks. He cursed delightedly. "When I seen you make that play in front of

a hostile house, I knowed you was my man. Why, with that face, kid, you kin walk into any bank in the country and they'd open the safe for you. What's your name? Not that I give a damn."

"Robby Finlay."

"Good. Boys, meet the kid, Robby Finlay," Borneo Johnny boomed to the room. "And drink up."

ONLY now did Borneo Johnny notice Lew, the gunman who had been waiting by his side during the conversation. Lew was visibly shaking, and Flint noticed that he shook even more at the look of simple shrewdness that had come over Johnny's face.

It had Flint puzzled for a moment, but when he saw the rest of Kilbrou's gunnies leave their drinks untouched and start back away from the bar, he knew what it was. Something tightened in his throat and he tried to catch Robby's eye, but the kid was studying his drink. Suddenly, Robby looked up and saw that the bar on either side of him was deserted. He turned to Borneo Johnny then looked the room over.

"I see," he said softly.

Borneo Johnny shook his head. "No you don't, but you will. Finlay, I keep my bunch at just seventeen. Any man that backs down one of my men has a chance to get in with me—providin' he can get in and still keep the number at seventeen. Understand?"

Robby's back was to the bar, his thumbs hooked in his belt. And Lew Potalmi, white and shaking, stood ten paces off.

Flint, standing at the end of the bar, watched the kid. He knew this old trick of Borneo Johnny's. It was the trick of a bully outlaw, the trick of a man who wanted always to keep his men at a killing pitch. He saw the kid's grave eyes look Potalmi over without the least sign of hostility, then shuttle to Borneo Johnny, who was unknotting a long bandanna around his neck. It was too late for Flint to step in now, for the kid had staked his claim to manhood and only he could back it up.

"I don't get it, I guess," the kid said.

Borneo Johnny walked over to Potalmi and gave him the handkerchief, then he stepped back. "There's one way to get in my bunch, Finlay. *Make room for yourself.*"

Potalmi, familiar with this outlaw way of settling arguments—the method which, in theory, would start both men for their guns at the same instant—walked slowly over to Robby and extended the handkerchief in his right hand, holding it by one corner.

"Take the other end," Potalmi said hoarsely. "In your right hand. When Kilbrou says go. . . ." his voice trailed off.

Robby's glance at Flint was fleeting, but Flint's face was impassive. Slowly, the kid reached out for the handkerchief with his right hand, taking one end of it. Potalmi backed off, stretching it tight. Flint wanted to cry out a warning, but he knew he didn't dare.

"When I give the signal, you draw with your handkerchief hand," Borneo Johnny said. Then: "Go!"

AS Flint expected, Potalmi, whose left hand was an inch from his gun-butt, streaked for his left gun instead of dropping the handkerchief and using his right hand. It was a murderer's trick if a man was left-handed.

But to Flint's amazement, the kid did the same thing!

Not six feet from Potalmi, Robby's draw was cat-quick, effortless, a short flashing arc that exploded at his left hip.

Potalmi, his gun almost clear of leather, was yanked sideways, a blank, strange look smearing over his loose face. Even as he teetered, his eyes washed over, the blood

welled out between his lips. He coughed, took a step back, then pitched his length on his face.

"A wise kid," Borneo Johnny said quietly, and he grinned with satisfaction. "I thought he had you, Finley, but you're cagey. How'd you know he was a left-hander?"

Robby, with smoking gun in hand, looked up at Kilbrou with quiet eyes. "I didn't," he said. "I just knew a rat like that wouldn't fight with only an even break."

If Flint had expected to see the kid step into manhood in those last few seconds, if he expected to see the killer lust creep into the kid's eyes, he was mistaken. The kid's face was a little pale, but expressionless.

Borneo Johnny laughed shortly. "Well, you'll do, kid." He jerked his head toward the door. "If you got a war-bag throw it over in the hotel. And stick around close. I may need you tonight." To the rest of his gunnies, he said with business-like emphasis: "Break out a new pack, Maury, and bring three bottles over. Maybe the kid has changed my luck." And he turned to the poker table, stepping over Lew on his way.

FLINT had drifted out to the porch. Robby, in a few second sauntered out. "Come over to the hotel," the kid said out of the corner of his mouth. He crossed the street and entered the building. Flint waited a moment, then crossed too.

The hotel was also owned by Pete. There was no one at the desk, which was gray with dust and cobwebs. Pete's customers merely went upstairs, threw their duffle in the first empty room and gave Pete a couple of dollars when they left.

Flint saw at a glance in the dusk of approaching night that Robby was not in the lobby, so he went upstairs. In an empty room he found the kid sitting on a bed-frame, his face in his hands.

Flint looked down the dark corridor, then shut the door behind him and leaned against it. The kid did not look up.

"First man you ever killed, Kid?" Flint asked gently.

Robby's face was bleak in the twilight as he glanced at Flint and nodded. "The first one. My dad told me that some day I'd do it. I'm too fast with a gun for my own good, he always said." His voice was low, tortured.

"You killed him fair," Flint said. He knew how the kid felt. "Don't think about it. It's down the river, Kid, and if you let it, it'll make you loco. All any man can do is stand up to it in a gun-fight, and if he wins, then it's out of his hands."

ROBBY nodded, building a cigarette with stiff fingers. His face was strained and tense. Flint built a cigarette too and smoked it down in silence. He was thinking what a pity it was that this kid had come to Hell's Wells just to join a killer like Borneo Johnny Kilbrou, but apparently he had. The kid was safe, all right, for not a man in the room could match that draw, Flint knew. It would take the kid about three years to find that out, then he would put Kilbrou away and lead the gang himself. No, the Kid was too good for that life, but telling him so wouldn't convince him.

Flint ground out his cigarette and started for the door. The kid was staring at the floor with a puzzled, stricken look on his face.

"Stick with it, Kid," Flint said grimly, a note of affection in his voice. "I could tell you how big a damned fool you are, but I ain't going to. You know your own mind. Good luck."

The kid roused himself and a look of

terror came into his face. "Flint! Don't go!" All the panic in his soul seemed to well up in that speech, and it checked Flint.

"You're ridin' with Borneo Johnny, now," Flint said gently. "You made your choice. I'm clearin' out while I'm still healthy. When Johnny thinks of me ag'in, I aim to have a good many miles of back-trail between me and him."

"But Flint!" the kid said slowly. "You told me to join Kilbrou there in the bar! You nodded your head!"

Flint scowled. "I was tryin' to git us out of there alive. But ain't that why you come here? To join Kilbrou?"

"Flint, I ain't ridin' with Kilbrou," the kid pleaded. "Not now. Not ever!"

Flint scowled irritably. "Then there's a back way outa' this place. I never knew you was a glory hunter. Sneak out of here and brag to them little brothers of yours how you killed an outlaw." Flint had him pegged now; a glory hunting kid. And Flint had the average gunman's contempt for that breed.

"Then what in hell are you doin' here?" Flint exploded savagely.

The kid accepted the scorn with bowed head. It was almost dark now and he rose, crossed to a rickety table where a candle stood stuck in the neck of an empty bottle. He lighted it and sat down on the bench again, clenching and unclenching his fists, avoiding Flint's contemptuous glance. Suddenly, he looked up at Flint.

"But damn it, Flint, I don't know what you're goin' to do when I tell you."

"If you ain't a law man, kid, spill it," Flint said coldly.

"Well"—Robby rubbed a hand over his face and looked up at Flint with tortured eyes—"Borneo Johnny Kilbrou held up a mine in Idaho a while back. There—there was a man, a U. S. Marshal, was hurt bad, but not killed. Johnny picked him up, slung him up in front of him and rode out past three guards usin' this marshal as a shield. That was the last that was ever heard of him."

"What about it?" Flint growled.

"I—I got to find him," Robby said hoarsely. "I dunno whether they killed him or not—likely they did—but I got to know."

CHAPTER FOUR

To Die for a Friend

FLINT sat down on the bed, his anger suddenly dead. The fact that this kid had ridden into an outlaw nest and risked his neck, for a friend, made something ball up in Flint's throat. He was looking at a kid who was willing to die for someone else.

Flint made his decision without knowing it. They were together now—pardners.

"Just what all do you know about this marshal disappearin'?" Flint asked, hiding the emotion in his voice.

"He was on Borneo Johnny's horse when Johnny rode out of the draw the mine was in. The guards seen this marshal and they never shot at Johnny. Naturally, they expected Johnny would put a bullet in the marshal's head as soon as he was clear, but they trailed him for two days lookin' for the body and never found it. The trail was clear, and they saw every track—and there wasn't a single track leadin' off to rock-rims, dry-gulches and such where Johnny would have throwed the body. Johnny's outfit—them that got away—split up, and the bunch Johnny headed roped a fresh horse on the second day and that horse traveled with them until they lost the tracks in a corner of that Nevada malpais."

"Then he must have rode with them?"

"As far as the posse could tell.'

Flint thought he understood what had happened, because he thought he understood Borneo Johnny. The outlaw was just cruel enough to nurse a man back to health, and use him from then on as a shield. Flint had enough of the daring in him to understand the plan. Why, in the company of a man wearing the badge of U. S. marshal, a man could walk into any bank in the west, ask to see papers, and stick the bank up without any trouble. Yes, unless Flint's guess was way wide, that was exactly what Borneo Johnny was aiming at. Flint stood up.

"He's here, I reckon," he announced quietly. "When Pete told me Kilbrou had been hangin' around for five days, I wondered about it. That explains—"

"Finlay!" a voice bawled from the foot of the stairs interrupting Flint. The panic came over the kid's face again, but Flint smiled. "You're safe, kid. Stick around with those hombres and do what Kilbrou says. If one of 'em starts to rawhide you, cut down on him without thinkin'. You can do it. I'll see you later. There's one thing I want you to do especially. Stick around Pete the hull night. Listen to what he says and don't let him talk alone with Kilbrou. Now high-tail it—and send Pete over to me now."

The kid gave Flint one long, grateful glance, smiled impulsively, then left the room.

Flint hung back a few minutes, then let himself out of the room and went downstairs. His plan was already formed—the only plan possible. The absurdity of Flint Stoneman, outlaw, risking his neck to save a U. S. marshal did not occur to him. Indeed, he had given the marshal little thought.

HE took a chair in the dark lobby and sat motionless, thinking. Yes, the marshal if he were here could be rescued all right, but Borneo Johnny Kilbrou must not be left alive to avenge the deed. Kilbrou, surrounded by all his hired gunmen, must die! And only Flint, cynical and tough as he was, knew what that might cost.

It was ten minutes before the thin form of Pete appeared in the doorway.

"Don't strike a match, Pete," Flint drawled. "Come over here."

Pete hesitated a moment. "Have you got a gun on me, Flint?"

"Right on your Durham tag," Flint said, although he was comfortably slacked in a chair with his guns in their holsters. "You better take off your irons, Pete. I'll feel better."

Obediently, Pete unstrapped his belt and threw it beside the door, then came over to the chair beside Flint after much stumbling around.

"Somethin' threw the prod into the hull bunch of you today," Pete growled. "I walk out from under Kilbrou's dynamite right into your guns. What do you want?"

Flint was silent a long moment, then he said softly: "Pete, just how scared are you of Johnny Kilbrou? Give it to me straight."

Pete made an uncomfortable growling noise in his throat. "Plenty," he said bluntly. "When he's drunk, I don't want to be in the same town with him."

"He ain't goin' to like it very well when that other gunnie of his tells him you tried to warn me out of there, is he?"

"I'm hopin' he's fergot it," Pete said fervently.

"Uh-huh. Just how bad do you want to git rid of Borneo Johnny Kilbrou for good?" Flint asked calmly.

"Why—you ain't—you ain't sayin'—"

"Cut it out, Pete," Flint interrupted scornfully. He was the outlaw now, shrewd, calculating and merciless, for he knew the kind of man he was dealing

with. "You've aimed for the small of many a man's back, Pete, and hit it, or you wouldn't of rode with old Danny Fleager. I asked you what you'd give to get Johnny Kilbrou out of your place, out of the way for good."

"You pryin' this outa' me at the end of a gun, Flint, so's you can take it back to Johnny?"

"I've got a gun, all right," Flint admitted, "but that's to keep you from goin' back to Kilbrou with this story. Outside of that, I just want to know."

Pete cleared his throat and when he spoke it was in a voice just above a whisper. "I'd give plenty. Plenty, see?"

"I thought so," Flint muttered, as if to himself. "How many men you got here?"

"Men?" Pete growled. "My God, if I had any, Kilbrou would have hightailed it days ago. Curley Dick Stover was the only jasper here when Kilbrou blew in. That night Kilbrou got roarin' drunk and chose Stover when he didn't like the lay of the cards. Five of Johnny's men cut down on Curley Dick 'fore he could git outa' his chair." Pete snorted. "Besides Soapy, I ain't got a one. There's an Arapahoe half-breed squaw and her kid does the cookin' and chores for me, but Soapy and me is the only two men here."

"Uh-huh," Flint grunted, "and how many men has Kilbrou got?"

"A dozen, I'd say."

"Lessee. That makes five men for us, don't it? That's countin' Finlay."

Pete counted laboriously. "That only makes four. You and me and Soapy and the kid."

"And the marshal," Flint added casually. "Don't fergit him."

Pete did not speak for a long moment, then he said: "The who?"

FLINT chuckled mirthlessly. "This is one time, Pete, you got to run with me or Johnny. You back down now and I'll go over and ask Kilbrou about this marshal you told me about. He won't like that, will he?"

"He'd kill you," Pete sneered.

"And you too," Flint added imperturbably.

Pete's cursing was vicious, but Flint laughed again. "Well, what about it? Where's he at?"

"I ain't sayin' there's a marshal here," Pete answered cautiously. "Matter of fact, I dont know what you're talkin' about."

"All right." Flint hove to his feet and took a couple of steps toward the door.

"Where you goin'?" Pete whispered savagely.

"Kilbrou. I'm goin' to tell him he better be careful about the rats he tells his secrets to."

"Wait, damit, wait!" Pete said hurriedly, cursing passionately. "He's here, that marshal. What do you want with him?"

"I want to know where he's at," Flint said coldly.

Pete sat down heavily. "My God, Flint, if Kilbrou ever hears about this he'll kill me."

"Where is he?"

Pete sighed. "You remember the old Elite restaurant up the street. Well, a couple of Kilbrou's gunnies are guardin' him down cellar there."

"Just two, huh?" Flint said. "That oughta' be easy."

"But what am I goin' to do, Flint, if Kilbrou catches you?" Pete whined.

"He won't. That's up to you. You go back there and set up the house, start a argyment or anything to keep Kilbrou in the saloon. Leave Soapy at the back door. When I git this marshal I'll come back to Soapy, then you and Finlay can drift out the front and we'll have 'em."

"I shouldn't do this," Pete moaned. "God, I shouldn't do this. If only some

of the boys was around here to fight Kilbrou off."

Flint took a step toward him, grasped him by the shirt and half hauled him out of his chair. "You'll do it, damn you!" he snarled. "And you won't double-cross me neither. The kid's over there and he'll be there all night. If he sees you talkin' to Kilbrou alone or any of his gunnies alone, he'll beat Kilbrou to cuttin' you to doll-rags! Get that!"

"I never crossed you yet, did I, Flint?" Pete whined.

"You never had the chance," Flint said. "Now git holt of a shoulder holster so Kilbrou won't think you're even packin' irons. Then go on over there. If you got any Greener's here, stack 'em behind the desk with plenty of shells. We'll likely need 'em. I'm goin'."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Marshal

FLINT stepped out into the night. He knew that Pete was bluffed. And he knew, too, exactly what he was up against. With the marshal rescued, that made five men against a dozen—or really only four, for Pete would stay out of the fight if he possibly could. It was barely a fighting chance. With luck, they might swing it.

But Flint laid his plans carefully, leaving nothing to chance. He circled the saloon, making for the corral behind. Most of the horses of Kilbrou's gang were here.

Flint approached quietly, and just as quietly let down the corral bars, then moved silently away. Soon, he knew, the horses would discover they were free, and would wander off quietly into the surrounding hills.

Then Flint set about the real business of the night. It hadn't occurred to Flint that he had taken on the kid's mission. All he knew was that the kid must not be killed, and must get out of this place alive.

He was trying to locate in his mind now the situation of the old Elite, where it had been in the boom days of Hell's Wells. He was far down the long single street, and in the faint starlight all the buildings looked alike. His progress was slow, uncertain.

But at last he found it. The Elite in the boom days lay next to the Assay office, and there was the Assay office now, hardly more than a small heap of caved-in timber. The Elite was larger, a box-like building, looming blackly before him. It was utterly dark, almost shapeless, and Flint wondered for a wrathful moment if Pete had purposely misled him.

He stopped in the shadow of the Assay office a moment, then, seeing nothing, he moved on warily until he was on the rotting board walk before the Elite. Cautiously, he took a step nearer.

"That's far enough," a voice pulled him up short from the inside of the Elite. "Whaddaya' want?"

Flint could see no one, but he knew he was being watched. He stopped, and spat noisily, taking his time before he answered. "What you got agin' puttin' a light up here?" Flint drawled familiarly. "A man's liable to walk down a well."

"Who is it? Clee?" the voice asked. It was the clue Flint was waiting for.

"Yeah. Johnny wants you," Flint said casually. "And watch out. He's wild."

"Listen, Clee. You ain't still drunk, are you?" the voice asked angrily.

"Hell no, I ain't," was Flint's mild answer. He waited a moment in silence. "Don't come, then, if you don't believe me. I'm just tellin' you." Whistling softly, he turned his back on the Elite and started for the saloon.

He had walked only a few yards when

he heard a man fall in behind him, cursing under his breath.

"Danged if you ain't a funny hombre," the guard said. "Half an hour ago you was carried cold to bed, and now you're up walkin' around."

Flint slacked his pace for the man to catch up with him. "Yeah. I'm a funny hombre."

Something in Flint's voice arrested the man. "Why — you ain't Clee. You ain't—"

FLINT whirled and his Colt's jammed into the mid-riff of the guard. "No, I ain't," he said grimly. Deftly, he flipped the guard's Colts out of their holsters, then savagely he drove his fist into the guard's face. The man went down, Flint on top of him.

Flint knew that a shot would bring Kilbrou's gang out of the saloon and he was not risking it. Evidently, the guard realized this too, for he started to yell just as Flint's hands reached his throat. In the dark, it was impossible for Flint to see the man, but he went about his business doggedly, intent on throttling him. He found his assailant was a big man, with sledgehammer fists which flailed at Flint's face as they wrestled around in the grass.

Flint fought to get his Colt's free, cursing himself for not having slugged the man in the first place. Suddenly, the guard writhed free, gasped loudly for breath as he rolled over, pitching Flint off. Before Flint could catch himself, the arm of the guard was under his chin, bending his head back. Frantically, Flint reached over his shoulder and rammed the gun barrel in the man's face.

A low cry escaped from the guard and his hold slacked. Flint twisted around and with his free arm slugged wildly with the gun at the guard's head. Again, he slugged, and again. The third blow whipped flush to the man's head, and with a smothered cry he relaxed.

"You won't wake up for a couple of hours anyway, sonny," Flint muttered. Sitting astride the man, Flint got his breath, listening meanwhile to see if an alarm had been given.

Not a sound. He rose, wiping the blood from his face, then took the guard by the collar and dragged him over beside the Assay office.

This next one would be a little tougher, he reflected grimly; but he did not hesitate.

He strode noisily into the Elite without any pretense of caution. Inside, he paused, then called: "Hey."

"Who is it?" a muted voice called from somewhere below him and to the rear.

"How do I git down there?" Flint called, fingering the butt of his Colt's.

"Back end," the voice said, after a pause.

Flint picked a gingerly way to the rear on the rotting floor boards. In the back room he saw a pencil of dim light beneath a door. He wrenched the door open and saw rickety steps leading down to a dimly lighted cellar. A man was standing at the foot of the stairs looking up into the darkness.

"Where's Clee?" Flint asked quickly.

The man was a short, squat cowpuncher, past middle age, unshaven, hatless, dressed in soiled range clothes.

"How the hell should I know?" the man growled. "Clear outa' here! You know what Johnny'll do if he catches me lettin' you jaspers down here." He peered up into the blackness of the stair well. "Who is it?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well, he headed for here," Flint said, ignoring the question. Kilbrou's lookin' for him and he's wild."

He started down the stairs and the

man backed off a bit, his hands falling to his sides.

"Stay where you are!" the man snarled. "I dunno that voice. Who the hell are you?"

"Never mind," Flint growled, continuing down the steps.

Then the man streaked for his guns and Flint dived. His body hurtled the remaining ten feet down the steps and rocketed out of the blackness on top of the guard. Together, they crashed against the wall and fell.

The sturdy guard fought like a maniac as Flint's smothering hundred and eighty pounds hurled him to the floor. They rolled over and over in the dirt to the middle of the room, Flint struggling for a grip on the man's throat. The guard's flailing legs knocked over the box table, spilling the candle off to the floor where it flickered and went out. Flint fought like a stocky stubborn bear to pin the man's arms, to smother him by sheer weight.

SUDDENLY, something exploded under Flint's shoulder and he felt as if his chest had been blown clean out of him. An orange flash blinded him at the same time. Frantically, Flint fought for the hand that had the gun, but the guard shot again and this time Flint felt a stab of pain in his thigh. It was too late now for caution! Flint clawed out his own Colt's and emptied it into the figure under him.

Slowly, the guard melted away from him and Flint staggered to his feet. This racket would bring the whole gang down on him! The pain in his chest was torment, and every breath was fire, but he worked quickly.

Striking a match, he lighted the candle again and looked around the barren, dirt-floored room.

A figure lay peacefully on a cot in the corner. Burning dark eyes looked up at Flint from a gaunt and unshaven face.

Flint strode over to the cot.

"You the marshal?"

The man nodded. Flint reached down, flipped him over and saw he was bound. Working feverishly with one ear cocked for a noise overhead, Flint freed him.

"Can you walk?" Flint asked.

"You're hit," the man whispered hoarsely.

"Git his gun," Flint muttered, wiping a thin trickle of blood from his mouth. "This ain't over."

The man staggered to his feet, swayed unsteadily a moment, then walked over to the dead outlaw. He was not overly tall, incredibly thin, and the skin on his unshaven face was parchment colored. His range-clothes were foul and blood-stained, and Flint saw that he could not move his left arm; the bandage on his shoulder showed through his torn shirt. He was close to thirty, Flint judged; but the fever in his dark eyes and the gauntness of his face under the crown of his thick black hair made him look aged. But when he turned to Flint with a gun in his hand, there was a new fire in his eyes.

"Let's get this straight, friend," the marshal said. "I know you. You're Flint Stoneman, the outlaw. Are you gettin' me out of this to take me somewhere else—or am I free?"

Flint shook his head, himself swaying a little unsteadily. "You're free, if I can git you free."

With difficulty, Flint made his way up the stairs and out into the night. Far down the street, he could see Kilbrou's gang boiling out of the saloon, the leaders well started toward the Elite. Luckily, they were afoot and half drunk.

With the marshal beside him, Flint hobbled behind the restaurant into the

tall buck brush, then started to work his way back to the hotel.

His companion laid a hand on his arm and Flint stopped.

"I tell you you're hit, man. Bad," the marshal said.

"It ain't botherin' me," Flint lied, through closed teeth.

"You stay here," the marshal said. "I know where the corrals are. I'll snake a couple of horses, come back for you and we'll ride out east."

"Huh-uh," Flint said. "We're downin' Borneo Johnny before we leave. It's that or he'll hunt us down."

"But damit! You can't—"

"And that ain't all," Flint said slowly. "Do you know Robby Finlay?"

"Robby?" the man whispered. He took a step toward Flint. "What about him? What did you say?"

"He's down there in the saloon, I reckon," Flint said. "I dunno how you feel about it, but I ain't leavin' him with Kilbrou."

"Oh, God," the marshal moaned softly. "Come on!"

CHAPTER SIX

Outlaw Lawman

WITHOUT another word, the marshal turned and headed for his hotel, Flint at his side. Flint felt his leg stiffening, and his pant leg was wet with blood, his half-boot sloshing warmly at each step. His chest was a volcano of agony, and little dancing lights came and vanished before his eyes, but he grinned happily into the night. If the kid had the sense to stay at the bar instead of milling out with Kilbrou's gunnies for the Elite, the rest would be easy.

They stopped in the dark at the corner of the hotel and listened. The saloon seemed deserted to Flint, although the lights were burning. For one terrible moment, Flint wondered if the kid was up at the Elite.

Staggering a little, he and the marshal made their way across to the saloon, and Flint noted that Robby's horse and his own were still at the hitchrack. That meant that the kid had not run.

Gently, Flint mounted the saloon steps, guns drawn. He could hear a loud voice talking with level deadliness to an absolute silence within the saloon.

Cautiously, Flint edged open the swinging doors.

Robby Finlay was standing at the bar. Borneo Johnny Kilbrou was seated alone at the poker table, a stack of chips in front of him. And Pete Hamrick was standing behind the bar, a shotgun trained on them both. It was Pete talking.

"Yeah, Flint done it, Johnny," he sneered. "What do you think of that?" He laughed. "Flint and this damned runt of a kid had it planned." He turned to Robby. "And you, you damned, cocky, mouthy runt of a kid! Flint's dead, see? You heard them shots. You haven't got a friend here, so you won't be missed."

He drew a Colt's from a shoulder holster and held it up.

"See that, Kilbrou?" he asked ominously. "That's the gun that'll kill you both. I've had enough of your hoorawin' this place. You'll git it right in the chest, and Finlay'll git it right in the face. When the boys come back, I'll tell 'em you fought it out. How d'ya like that?"

"You wouldn't do that, Pete," Kilbrou whined hoarsely, his eyes washed over with fear. Robby's face was white, Flint saw, but his eyes were steady as they looked at Pete.

Flint eased the door open slowly, looking back at the rear door to see if Soapy had the shotgun trained on the room. The panel was closed.

"Freeze!" Flint said crisply. "You, Pete!"

Pete suddenly stiffened and did not move.

"Now put down that Greener and Colt's."

Inch by inch, Pete lowered his Colt's, put down the shotgun, then turned to face Flint and the marshal, now standing just inside the doorway. The marshal was covering Kilbrou.

Flint smiled wearily, and his eyes were glazing a little bit. The kid was safe.

"You—" he began, when his eyes shuttled to the back door. He saw the panel sliding open.

Flint's guns nosed up in shattering explosion at the hidden Soapy. It was the signal for bedlam to break loose. Soapy's shot-gun crashed once, and Flint felt a new agony in his chest as he teetered back on his heels. Borneo Johnny dived under the table, sending a snap shot at the overhead lamp, which threw the room into darkness. The marshal saw Pete dive for the shotgun as the lights went out and he let go at the bar.

Flint moved his position, and staggered back against the wall. He heard the marshal's cool voice say: "Ain't a man gets by this door."

THEN silence came again. Flint wiped the welling blood from his mouth, and with trembling fingers loaded his guns.

He thought he knew what would happen, and cold terror welled up in him. First, Borneo Johnny would try to stall until his men came trailing back from the Elite at the sound of the gun-fire.

He would have to be forced to fight, and only Flint knew how hard that would be. Borneo Johnny was a veteran of a thousand unlighted saloon brawls, and he knew the ropes. Swiftly, in Flint's mind, he thought out Borneo Johnny's scheme. He would try the back way. And the kid, a smart little devil, would understand that and move to the back door to intercept him. But what the kid didn't know and what Flint did, was that Borneo Johnny would try an old ruse. He would wedge a Colt's, cocked in the back of a chair, anywhere it would stick, then tie his bandanna to the trigger or loop a belt buckle over the trigger. Then backing off, he would yank the belt, firing the gun. Robby would open up at the flame, thinking Borneo Johnny was behind it, but Johnny would be a yard off. And then, Borneo Johnny would open up on the kid—kill him!

Flint took a deep breath of molten fire and stood upright. Slowly, he staggered toward the poker table.

"I'm comin' for that table, Kilbrou," he said ominously, doggedly.

Flint knew he was walking to probable death, but he didn't care. He kept moving, feeling his knees try to buckle under him. The blackness before his eyes was swimming.

He flipped a shot into the table. "Don't you shoot, kid," he said hoarsely. Desperately, doggedly, as he staggered forward, he knew he must force Borneo Johnny to fight. The kid would not be decoyed to a cheap gunman's death if he could help it!

Suddenly, the crash of an over-turned table echoed through the room, and Flint opened up again. He knew it was invitation for Borneo Johnny or Pete to nail him.

And they did. In a blasting chatter of gunfire, Borneo Johnny let loose only a few yards away. At the same instant, Pete cut down with the shotgun.

Flint felt that slug of buckshot in his side and he knew he was done. He felt Borneo Johnny's slugs plucking numbly at his shoulder, his leg, his hat, but Flint moved on. His guns rocked and bucked against his palms as he emptied the guns

at the orange spots that were Borneo Johnny Kilbrou's gun flashes.

Robby opened up, and the marshal whipped four shots at Pete. All this Flint knew dimly.

Then silence while Flint teetered, listening. Before him, he heard a foot drag across a sanded floor, a cough which ended in a gurgle, then the soft thud of a falling body.

And Flint knew Borneo Johnny Kilbrou was downed.

"Now clear out!" Flint whispered. "Our horses—hightail. . . . He choked up with blood, and he felt himself falling, felt the impact as he pitched forward on his face. Yet the only thing in his mind was to get the marshal and the kid out before the gang returned.

A MATCH flared by him. It was Robby, the Kid. His face was haggard, his eyes wet with tears.

"Flint! They got you!" he cried in a heartbroken voice.

Flint nodded. "Yeah. They got me right, Kid, but it don't hurt," he whispered. "Get out! Pronto, kid. They're comin'."

"And leave you?" Robby cried. The match died and another was struck and by its light, Flint saw the marshal with his arm around Robby.

"Who—who are you?" Flint whispered.

"Steve Lafin—Robby's brother," the marshal replied gently.

The room was swimming crazily before Flint's eyes, and he felt that all that was ever Flint Stoneman was slowly slipping from his shattered body.

"Then—then git him out," Flint whispered, extending his hands. One of them Robby gripped tightly the other the marshal held gently.

Flint smiled at Robby. "So long, kid." To the marshal, he whispered: "Take care

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of him, friend. Take care. . . ." His eyes closed, his breath fluttered, vanished.

"It's no use, Robby," the marshal said slowly. "He's cashed in his checks. We can't help him."

The kid let the match die. "I—I wish we could claim him for a brother, Steve."

"We ain't good enough," Steve said.

A warning yell from out in the night told them they had little time. They raced to the two horses at the rack, and in a fusilade of drunken gunfire they galloped out of the town.

Fifteen minutes later on the lip of the ridge west of town, the brothers pulled up. Even as they watched, they saw the saloon being fired by the leaderless and drunken outlaws. It didn't matter. Flint was getting the honorable burial of the ancients.

And Robby, looking down, smiled sadly.

"Steve, you never told me an outlaw could be a man, too."

"I never knew it myself, Robby," his brother answered, "till I saw old Flint die."

THE END

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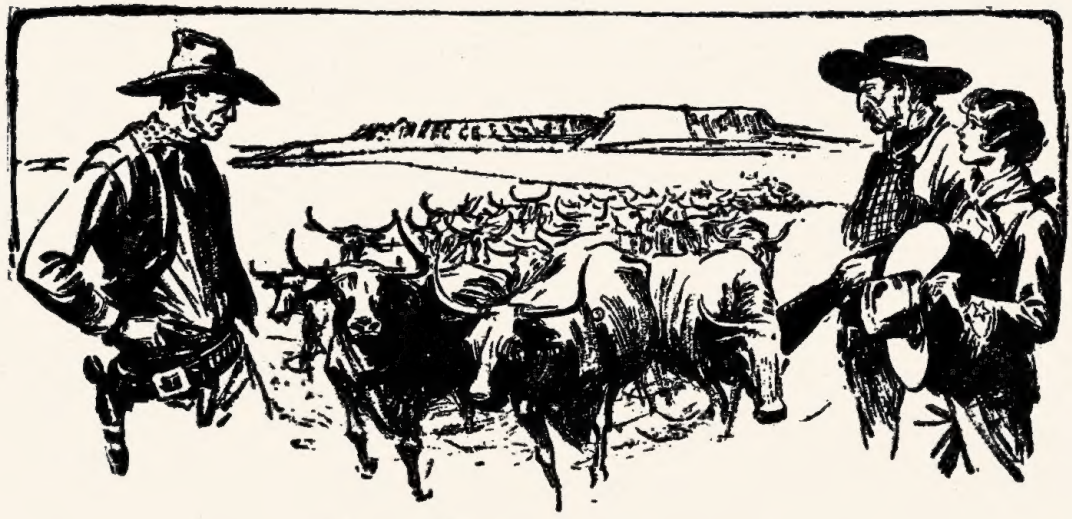

Up The Trail

CHARLIE SMITH oiled up his gun— and then didn't go down town to shoot Jack Spade. That surprised every one in town except Lula Wiggins. Lula was in love with Charlie and wanted to marry him—she didn't want a corpse for a husband and had hit upon a little scheme as a way of keeping him alive. Jack Spade was a wizard with a gun and he wanted to hang Charlie's hide on the fence. Charlie was willing to give Jack a try. But Lula had ideas of her own:

"I won't marry you if you go on carrying a gun, Charlie. But if you gotta shoot Jack Spade be sure yore Colt's is well oiled."

Charlie gave up carrying a gun after that and Jack Spade began to call him yellow. It all came to a head one day in June, a week before the wedding. Charlie was down in the Silver Dollar Bar toasting the bride. Jack dumped his glass into the cuspidor. Charlie would have shot him right there except that he'd left his gun home on Lula's orders. He went to get it.

Charlie's gun had sand in it. Very carefully he cleaned it. It took him the better part of half an hour before he was through—and by that time he had cooled off considerable. It began to seem pretty silly to him that he was getting ready to shoot that tinhorn gambler. And he felt a little cheap that it was to be over Lula Wiggins, the girl he was going to marry. He hadn't lost his nerve—but he just couldn't shoot Jack Spade. He sat there for a long time wondering why, and holding that gun in his hand.

Then he became aware of a movement outside. Men were gathering. Jack Spade was in the lead. They were accusing Charlie of being yellow—yelling it so that everyone could hear.

"Won't even stand up for his woman," Jack Spade was hollering. "That feller's got the guts of a prairie hen. He oughta—"

He didn't get any further for Lula had opened the door of her little house across the street. Young and lovely she stood there on the veranda.

"Charlie ain't fightin' with you," she said. "He never did go in for skunk shootin'."

Jack's dark eyes blackened. He was pretty drunk this day. He broke through the crowd. got up to the girl just as Charlie Smith came out. He reached to take the girl in his arms. For a long time he had wanted to marry Lula Wiggins. That was at the bottom of the feud.

Charlie's first words stopped him:

"Yuh better come foggin', Spade!"

The gambler swung with the speed of lightning. His gun barked twice before Charlie's even cleared the freshly oiled holster. But both shots went wild over that distance. Charlie's first shot broke Ace's swift right hand.

Charlie walked slowly across the street, took the girl's arm and led her inside. Charlie had won. But he looked very unhappy.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't want to shoot him. When I was oilin' that gun I thought it was kinda silly."

"It was silly." The girl looked up with wide eyes. "It woulda been sillier if you'd tried to kill him down there in that saloon. You get flustered when you're up close to a feller. But you can shoot straighter than Jack over a distance. You always could."

Charlie began to understand then. She knew that the two men would have to shoot it out sometime. She would take that chance on losing a husband. But she wanted to give him an even chance. That was why she'd made him give up carrying a gun. The time would come, she knew, when Charlie would have a break.

Charlie held her close. Here was a woman to tie to. And he knew that he would never slip his knot. For Lula was a girl. like so many of that pioneer breed, who would risk everything for her man. She had taken a bigger chance than he had—for if her scheme hadn't worked . . . .

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Study the picture of the country road and see if you can find ten of the hidden faces. Sharp eyes may find them. Some of them look straight at you, some are upside down, others are sidewise. Look for them in the clouds, tree, around the dog's legs, in the bushes, etc. It is not as easy as some people may think. Don't give up—keep looking and you may find them **Send your answer quick. Don't delay. There is a $1,250.00 cash prize for promptness if declared first prize winner, according to the plan which the coupon brings. Mail this coupon today.**

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Names on Request

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$1,250.00 CASH

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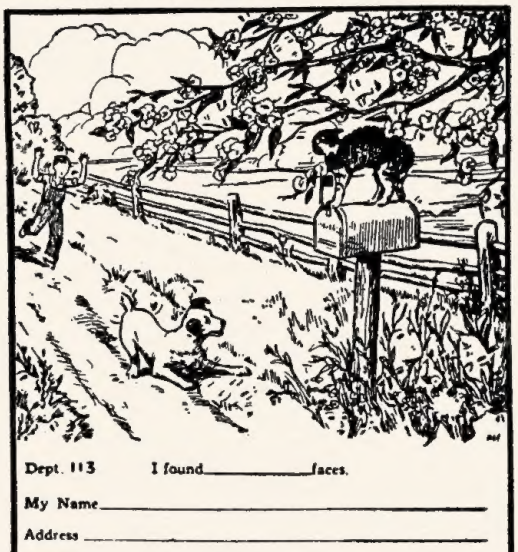

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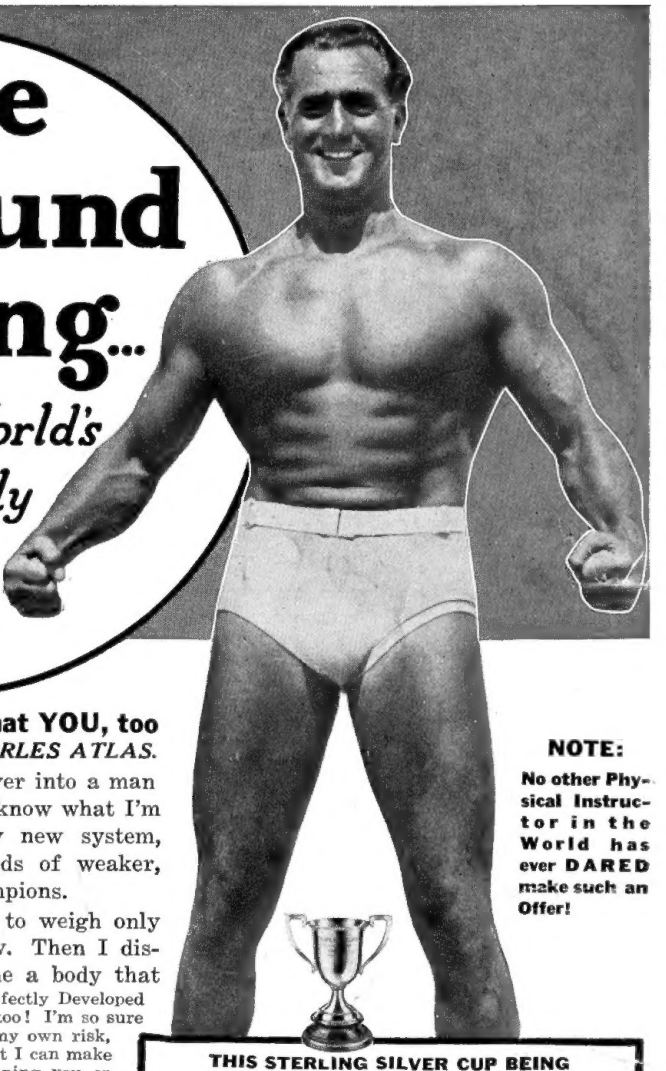

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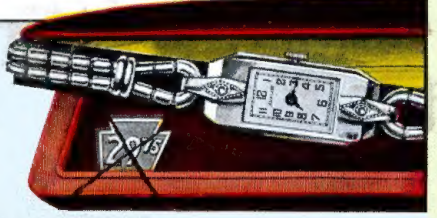

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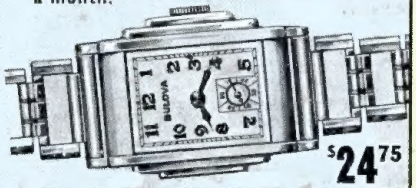

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